

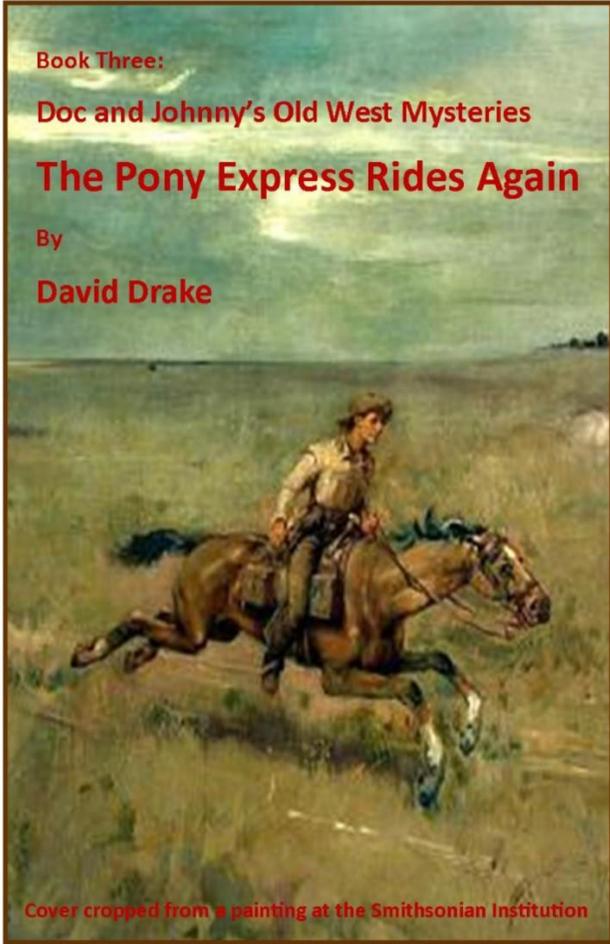
Book Three:

Doc and Johnny's Old West Mysteries

The Pony Express Rides Again

By

David Drake



Cover cropped from a painting at the Smithsonian Institution

The Pony Express Rides Again

**The Third book in the series:
Doc and Johnny's Old West Mysteries**

**By
David Drake**

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[Books should be read in order.]

**Book ONE: Johnny's Secret
Book TWO: The Red Bend Bank Robbery
Book THREE: The Pony Express Rides Again
Book FOUR: Kidnapped
Book FIVE: The Crimson Bandit
Book SIX: The Baffling Stagecoach Robberies**

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BACKGROUND – 1880s in the United States

The Year was 1880. Kansas had been a State for nineteen years, the Civil War had been over for fifteen years, the national baseball league had just been formed, Rutherford B. Hayes was president, and Thomas Edison had just invented the light bulb. The common use of cars was still twenty-five years in the future.

Many of the men still wore six-shooters in central and western Kansas – a place where being quick on the draw was often a matter of life or death. Jessie James and his gang still pillaged the Midwest. Horseback and buckboards were the primary means of local transportation and the railroad had only recently connected the east coast with the west coast. The stagecoach, although replaced by trains in most places on the two coasts, was still the necessary choice for long distance travel through many remote parts of the plains states.

It would take almost \$25.00 in today's money to equal the purchasing power of \$1.00 in 1880 Kansas.

Boys did grow to be thirteen, back then, and that's the age of our featured character in this story, Johnny Baker.

Our Story to Date

Johnny, thirteen, an orphan, and living with his Great Aunt, Mae, in Red Bend, Kansas in 1880 had been shot in the chest and recovered, rounded up several bad guys and made good friends of Doc, the country Doctor, Cal, the Marshal,

Cilla (short for Pricilla) the newspaper editor and a young lady named Clair (she has a wonderful smile and very soft hands). The Marshal had brought Johnny's horse, Diablo, from Kansas City where the boy had lived before his parents died. Johnny counts on Doc's for advice when it comes to solving the mysteries that seem to always be popping up around him. And, oh yes, Johnny had become a multimillionaire in the previous several months (but we will just keep that between us because he doesn't want anybody to know about it).

In the previous book (The Red Bend Bank Robbery) Johnny solved the robbery before the bad guys could leave town with the money and made friends with Abbot, another orphan boy – well, he had been an orphan until Johnny found a way to reunite him with his mother. He began high school with Doc and Cilla directing his studies. He owes them a paper on Kansas history.

A Little Background about the Pony Express

In April of 1860 the Pony Express was established. Abraham Lincoln would soon be elected President. It carried letters across the country from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento California, by horseback – a distance of 1,900 miles. Small horses (not really ponies) were used. They were ridden by young, lightweight riders (under 125 pounds), sitting astride a specially designed light weight saddle and carrying a mochila – a piece of well-tanned leather with four pouches to carry up to 20 pounds of letters. It fit over the saddle so it could be quickly transferred to the next horse. The weight of the rider kept it in place.

Each rider rode in ten hour shifts and averaged 75 to 100 miles a day. He rode a different horse from each station to the next. The stations were spread about ten miles apart where, with the mail mochila in hand, he made a quick switch to a fresh horse and was on his way again in a matter of seconds. They earned \$100 a month – three times the salary of the average unskilled laborer at the time. It cost a dollar to send a letter by Pony Express – very expensive at the time

(nearly \$30 in today's currency).

The riders had to brave all kinds of weather, outlaws, and in some places Indians (as Native Americans were referred at that time) on the war path. The expansion of the telegraph, improved stage connections, and the resulting financial problems caused the Pony Express to close in October of 1861, 18 months after it began.

So, by 1880, the time Johnny was beginning his new life in Red Bend, the Pony Express had been out of business for 19 years.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Assignment

It was the second Saturday in November. At eight o'clock that morning Johnny dismounted and tied Diablo to the hitching rail in front of the restaurant. He entered, hoping to find Doc, Cilla, the Marshal or any assortment of the three. He had already made the considerable ride out to Max Carson's place north east of Red Bend delivering the paper for Cilla – papers, more accurately. The second Saturday of each month he took the old man the previous four weekly editions. Max seldom came to town. He was old and walked with a crutch. He had been a station master for a Pony Express station up on the northern border of the state, twenty years before.

"Hey," Johnny began seeing all three at doc's table toward the rear of the big room. "Who's minding the town, with you guys all in here?"

"We assumed you were," Doc said, "– since you weren't in here conning us out of breakfast."

"You knew I was going out to Max Carson's place this morning – second Saturday of the month. I'm starved. Aunt Bea's flapjacks wore off an hour ago."

The Marshal reached out and pulled a chair over from another table and the three of them scooted around to make room. It was an odd group – three adults and one young teen, but the people of Red Bend had grown used to seeing it.

"Nice morning for a ride," the Marshal said.

"It was. Diab was eager to get back. He galloped most of the way. I think he thought he had something to prove."

The others looked at each other, puzzled although not

surprised – Johnny often had comments that made little sense without the explanation that followed.

“Max was talking about the Pony Express – like he always does. He said a good horse and rider back then could make the ten miles between stations in about an hour. He lives five miles out – half that distance. I’m pretty sure Diab was trying for a thirty-minute trip on the way back to town. He came close.”

“So, Diab understands tales about historic events, knows that an hour contains sixty minutes and can divide sixty in half and arrive at thirty?” Doc asked shaking his head.

“It’s well known around here that he’s a smart horse.”

Cilla turned to Doc.

“If that’s the case perhaps we should go out and ask the horse why Johnny’s history paper isn’t ready yet. All we’ve been getting from the boy are excuses.”

Johnny smiled. He loved it when they went on about things like that. He would enter into the fun.

“I’m sure he can explain. Just remember to phrase your questions so he can answer yes or no with his head – he’s still a bit shy about speaking in front of anybody but me.”

It was worth a chuckle. They didn’t know why they kept trying to get the best of the boy – he always won!

“Actually,” Johnny went on in a suddenly serious vein, “I think I have a topic for the paper that I can get excited about. The Pony Express. Max has a million stories and this morning he shared something new with me about a rider that vanished between his station up north and down here at Red Bend. Never found hide nor hair of him – Max’s words.”

“What was a Pony Express Rider doing this far south?” the Marshal asked. “The route was up north along the state line with Nebraska.”

“It was a special delivery, I guess you could say. Max said that when the Pony Express began having financial problems in 1861 the local station masters often didn’t get paid so they came up with creative ways to make money. One was to send resting riders on special – secret – delivery rides for rich people. They charged a lot for them so both the rider and the Station Master made out pretty well.”

“I wasn’t aware of that,” Cilla said.

“I heard rumors as a kid,” the Marshal said. “I thought seriously about becoming a rider – they made really good money. Then it folded and here I am.”

Doc turned the conversation back on Johnny.

“What’s the story about the missing rider?”

“I don’t have all the details, yet, and neither does Max. It will take some detective work.”

“Now, I see,” Cilla said. “You found another mystery to solve and are trying to make it double as a school project.”

“Very perceptive, ma’am. Is there any rule against having school work be something that actually interests the student?”

Doc smiled and sipped at his coffee, eager to hear Cilla’s response to the well-founded contention implied in the boy’s question.

“Well, no. Of course, not. I just hate to think your tombstone will read, ‘Death by Research Paper’.”

They could all chuckle over her come back. Johnny took the response as full permission to pursue the project. The adults understood there was no reason to try and dissuade (advise against) the lad once he had his mind made up. They could say, “No, under no circumstances whatsoever, absolutely not, never ever,” and Johnny would hear, “Go to it. Sounds like a great idea!”

“Glad you’re all excited about it, too. I’ll put together a set of questions the paper will need to answer and go over them with you Monday. Now, about breakfast – steak and eggs gives a good kick start to the brain, right, Doc.”

“Sure, why not?”

Doc raised his hand to get the attention of the waitress.

The Marshal had things to do so donned his hat and left. Cilla reached into her bag – no one would have known it was Cilla unless she was carrying her large, colorful, flowered, hand bag.

“A letter came for you on the stage yesterday afternoon, Johnny.”

She handed it to him. Seeing the return address, he became excited.

“It’s from Abbot or James or Jimmy – you know who I mean. Let’s see what he has to say. It’s been almost two

weeks since he went to live with his mother down in Garden City.”

Johnny opened it with great care for a boy his age.

“Dear Johnny. I don’t know where to send this so I will send it to the newspaper office. Everything is going good here. It seems you’re Gus at the telegraph station got me a job delivering telegrams down here. I often earn a nickel tip for making a delivery. That adds up so I can feel like I’m really helping out around here. Mom is wonderful. So is grandmother. Can you believe that? I can talk about my mom and grandmother?”

“Doc Pinkerton – the local saw bones (ha ha) – stopped by and asked if I’d help him out with the horse and buggy sometimes – go with him on out of town calls. I have the feeling your Doc had something to do with that – it’s less a real job and more so I will have a man in my life. I really do appreciate that. The owner of the leather shop said he could use help from time to time and asked if I would be interested. I’m thinking someway Garbo arranged that. Also, the banker contacted mom and said there had been an account set up in my name. Something about a relocation program. It is a great deal of money. I’m reluctant to use it since I’m not sure how it came about. If you know anything about it please let me hear.

“I’m beginning to believe people are a better lot than I used to think they were. Tell Gus and Doc thanks for me, please – and Cilla. I hope you can come and see me sometime. I have the whole loft over the kitchen to myself – can you believe that? I have a place of my own – inside, away from the animals. There is even an indoor bath tub in a corner of the kitchen.

“I can’t thank you enough, and I know you’ll say I don’t have to thank you but I’m sure you understand how it is – both of us being orphans – well, you know what I mean.

“Your friend, Jimmy (Abbot)”

“Those were all really nice things you did for him, Johnny,” Doc said.

Cilla reached out and patted his hand, nodding.

“I never know how to handle comments like that,” Johnny said.

“Then just shut up and eat your breakfast,” Doc said, clearly kidding.

Sometimes it was still hard for Johnny to tell about that. Doc could put on a gruff way about him, but he was learning it was the old gentleman’s way of dealing with things he didn’t feel comfortable with. Imagine that; they had something in common other than their disagreement about what Johnny’s life’s work should be – writer or doctor; neither of them knew how to deal with compliments.

Johnny searched for a new topic.

“So, what can you two old timers tell me about the Pony Express?”

They both looked around as if searching for the ‘old timers’ he had mentioned. It was worth smiles all around.

“It didn’t really affect us much here in Red Bend,” Cilla said. “The express mostly carried long distance mail – east to west and west to east. It handled very little local mail.”

“For as short a period of time as it was in existence, it probably had more written about it than it deserved,” Doc said. “There are dozens of books recounting the exploits of the brave and fearless young riders – many of them not much older than you are right now. Much of it, I’m sure, is pure fiction, but it makes a good read.”

“It sounds like I already know more about it than you two put together. I’ve read lots of those books – back in Kansas City – and I’m already working on a Pony Express story, myself.”

“Here’s an idea,” Cilla said. “You are a very good writer. What would you think about working your research about the lost rider into your story and I’ll publish it as a serial in the paper – one installment every week. That way it can serve as both your history and your English class.”

“I like the idea,” Johnny said, “but I do see the subterfuge (clever, underhanded trick) involved.”

“Subterfuge? From Cilla? Never!” Doc said smiling in her direction and offering a wink.

“Regardless of what you say, it will set deadlines for me that I have to meet. Probably a very good idea. It seems you may know me pretty well.”

Doc put on a serious face.

“There is one thing you have to promise.”

“Oh? Sure. What’s that?” Johnny said, buying into the solemn mood Doc had just set.

Doc leaned in close to deliver his answer.

“The work has to be all yours and not Diablo’s.”

They laughed out loud causing the others in the room to turn and look. The town’s people were used to smiling when Johnny was near-by so it seemed quite natural.

Cilla excused herself and headed back to the newspaper office to begin work on the following week’s edition. Doc pushed back from the table just a bit and began reading the paper she had brought him earlier that morning. Johnny made short work of the inch-thick steak, clearly savoring (enjoying) every bite.

In his mind, he had already begun work on his research paper. It had suddenly morphed (grown) into a serialized story in the paper. It was exciting. His plan was to begin visiting Max at least once a week to learn more information. He needed to get the name of the rider that vanished and find out where he came from, how old he was, how long he had been a rider and if he had any surviving family that might have any ideas about his disappearance. He needed to find out from Max who had sent the special delivery the rider had been carrying and who it was going to – what it contained if that were known.

There were lots of old timers in Red Bend who he could chat with and find out what they might know. Unlike the mysteries he and Doc had worked on together before, this one, he figured, should at least not risk being shot at [Don’t bet the ranch on that, young man!].

He started by visiting his friend, Cal – Marshal, Cal Calvin.

“Would there be any records in your office about that Pony Express rider that disappeared? He was heading in this direction is why I’m asking.”

“I’m not aware of any. There are boxes of old records upstairs. When I have time, I’ll see if anything up there looks promising. Back issues of Cilla’s paper might be a better place to start. Her father would have been editor back then.”

“Good idea. Who was the lawman here, nineteen years

ago?”

“Hitch Harper. Lives with his daughter down in Sandy Ford, now. Haven’t seen him in years. I suppose he’s still alive.”

“I’ll need directions.”

“Why don’t we arrange a ride down there together? It would be good to see him again. I was his deputy for only one year before he retired, but in many ways he was like a father to me. Let me talk to some folks first and make sure he’s still there. It’s about a five-hour ride.”

“That sounds great. Let me know what you know whenever you know whatever it is you’re going to know.”

“Believe it or not, I think I understood that!”

“Of course, you did,” Johnny said smiling. “I’m a master communicator, soon to be a nationally known author of a serialized story – The Pony Express Rides Again – printed in the Red Bend Newspaper.”

“Well, at least known in several parts of this county,” Cal said, kidding the boy and ruffling his hair.

Johnny grinned and nodded, not really making any attempt to hide his hope that it would become much more than just a local story. Johnny had many dreams about his future and was already taking steps to see that they could come true. He figured the three most important things to make them happen, were, first, to learn all he could about everybody he met – likes, dislikes, hopes, beliefs, the things that gave folks their individual personalities. Second, to get the very best education he could obtain – learn about the world, its history, other people’s beliefs and how the universe operated (science, math). Third, to figure out how he could best fit into things and build a life that would be wonderful for him as well as helpful for others. He wanted the world to be a better place because he was a part of it.

There would be other things, he thought, but pursuing those three should get him off to a fine start. (And of course, there were girls. He figured if he could ever really figure them out they’d probably help make life great, too.)

He left the Marshal’s office and crossed the street to the newspaper.

“The Marshal says copies of the paper, back when your

dad was editor, might have some information about the missing Pony Express rider. You keep them in the back room, right?”

“There’s a copy of every paper dad and I ever published back there. Mostly one year to a crate. In the beginning, it was a once a month paper but soon became a weekly. The side of each crate has the year or years painted on it. Go at it. You’re wanting the 1860 and 1861 editions, I believe. It had grown into a weekly by then.”

“Alright. I’ll go see if I can locate them. Is it okay if I bring copies out here to look at – the big chair and all?”

“Of course. But here I was assuming you just wanted to be out here close to my sparkling personality and keen mind.”

“That, too, and more ready access to your cookie tin.”

He located the newspapers and spent the rest of the morning paging through the first several of them looking for information. He got caught up in lots of articles that had nothing to do with the rider, but did provide information and insights about how life had been during that period. Red Bend had stayed about the same size during all those years – five hundred people give or take a few. It had been on the stage route for many years and got its start as a cow town – a stopover for cowpokes on cattle drives – providing supplies and entertainment for the men.

Its name was taken from the red rocks that formed a natural bend in the creek that came in from the low, red rock, hills to the north – out behind his Aunt’s place – and gave the water a red tint for several miles on downstream. Its first settlers – like across much of the Kansas territory – were Norwegian, but later it became more of a cross section of nationalities.

As he folded and replaced the last paper he’d read that morning he had an observation.

“Reading these papers is better than reading history books.”

“Oh. What makes you say that?” Cilla asked.

“Well, it reports how things really were at the moment. People who write history books often add their interpretations and I think that changes the real facts – subtly, maybe, but I’m

thinking it does change the report.”

“A wise observation. I’ve often thought teaching American history from using just newspaper reports would be a lot of fun and, like you say, probably more accurate.”

“I gotta run,” Cilla. “Wood to chop and apples to pick out home. Can’t figure how Aunt Bea ever got along before I got here. I’m glad I’m here. A few months ago, I didn’t believe I’d ever be able to say that and really mean it. Red Bend’s home, now. Every month, my life back in Kansas City is becoming more like just a memory – not one I want to ever forget, mind you, but it’s true.”

Early November was significantly cooler by day and night than the summer and early fall had been. Snow was possible at any time although it usually held off until later in the month. Johnny had started leaving his shirt on while he chopped wood and at night he slept under blankets. The creek was often still warm enough for a brief swim and a session with a bar of soap, but Johnny knew those days were numbered.

It had snowed, of course, when he had lived back in Kansas City, but the many, tall buildings blocked and slowed the winter winds, which, he had been told could become downright dangerous out there on the level plains of central Kansas. There were weather events called ‘white outs’ in which blizzards and strong winds combined to make it impossible to see your hand in front of your face. It made him feel fortunate they lived so close to town and were surrounded by woods that not only slowed the winds but also held what his aunt referred to as ‘a hundred years of fire wood’.

The garden had been harvested with lots of potatoes, turnips and carrots in the cold cellar (an underground room behind the house, covered with several feet of dirt, which doubled as a safe place to go when the tornadoes of the spring and summer rumbled across the area – thus its nickname, ‘fraid hole’, came into being.).

Sometimes, a best source of information is right under one’s nose. That turned out to be the case in Johnny’s research into the Pony Express report. Over supper he shared with his Aunt Bea how Cilla and Doc had approved his idea for the school project and how it was going to involve

expanding the story he had been writing and sharing with her in the evenings.

“I’m counting heavily on Max Carson, the retired station manager, to help and I’ve started going through the newspapers of the early 1860s. Cal says he’ll ride with me down to Sandy Ford to talk with Hitch somebody – the Red Bend sheriff before Cal became Marshal of the territory.”

“And then of course there is your aunt who lived through the time right here in Red Bend,” Bea said, looking at him across the top of her glasses.”

“You? I forgot. Didn’t intentionally leave you out. You know stuff, do you?”

“Depends on what sort of stuff you’re searching for,” she said. “I was fond of a young man who went off to ride for the Pony Express. I saw him off and on during that time. He got every eighth week off to rest up. He had some harrowing (dangerous and disturbing) stories to relate – some of them may have even been true.”

She chuckled.

“I want to hear everything you can remember. It will be great – specially to help make my book authentic. I need to know what he wore, the route he rode, what he did in his free time and how much of it he got, what and when he ate during his rides, outlaws trying to rob him, Indians trying to scalp him – all those sorts of things.”

“I’ll be glad to supply what I can. Like I said, I can’t vouch for how truthful some of his stories were. My experience was that young men his age often felt the need to make themselves look better than they were by extending the truth more than just a little.”

“It’s a temptation even at my age,” Johnny said seriously. “I try to control adding such creative edges around the things I do, but sometimes before I realize it, there they are.”

After they finished eating the two of them did up the dishes together. It was Johnny’s night to wash. His aunt dried. The conversation changed to the more practical side of life.

“We’re going to have a lot more apples than we can use – even if you make cider,” Johnny said. “I can’t be more

than a third finished picking the big tree on the west side of the house and I've almost filled two bushel baskets. There are six trees to go after that one."

"They'll winter real well down in the 'fraid hole' with the potatoes. You can begin taking some with you every time you ride into town for Cal, Cilla, Doc, Clair's family, the teachers at school and other people you know. The old people expect to receive some from me about this time of year. Next Saturday we can load up the buggy and make some deliveries."

It was one of the things he was coming to respect the most about his Aunt – the way she did her part to help take care of other people. It was one of those important things he was learning about living a good life that really hadn't been a part of his original family. They took good care of him and of each other, but in the city folks didn't seem to go out of their way to be helpful beyond that. In Red Bend, it didn't matter who you were – friend or stranger – if you needed something, there was always somebody there to pitch in and help out.

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CHAPTER TWO

Max always enjoyed Johnny's visits. That morning the boy brought a peck of apples and a huge slice of his Aunt Bea's apple pie.

"Good to see you, son. What brings you back so soon?"

"I came to bribe you with apples and pie to tell me more about that Pony Express rider who vanished between your station and Red Bend. I've decided to do a paper on it for school."

"Always happy to go on about the old days. No need to bring a bribe. Apple pie, you say?"

Max had grown up in central Arkansas and spoke with an accent that Johnny thought was wonderful. He had been a wagon driver most of his life – transporting cargo with four-horse teams from Kansas City on west. It had been a difficult life but one he clearly loved. He often spoke about sleeping under the stars at night, fixing meals over an open fire, hunting and fishing for food, and having what he referred to as 'rip-roarin' times when he laid over in towns with saloons and dancing girls. Johnny really wanted to know more about 'rip-roarin' but was shy about asking.

Max lived in a two-room stone house with a rusting, rippled, corrugated, metal roofing. Johnny had been inside during rain storms and loved the sound the driving rain made as it fell against the metal. Each room had a fireplace; the one in the main room sat three feet off the floor and doubled as the stove and oven. The house had one, glass window on each side and only one door, which opened out front onto a narrow

porch with wooden plank floor and a roof held up by roughhewn (unfinished) 4 by 4 inch posts. It was on that porch that Max and Johnny usually talked – Max in his rocker and Johnny on the floor with his back up against a post.

Johnny unloaded the apples and pie from Diablo's saddle bags and let the horse graze freely around the property. While he was there he always pumped the water trough full and carried a bucket of water inside for the old man to drink and use in cooking.

He had earlier related that the problem with his left leg stemmed from a bullet he'd taken that shattered the bone in his hip (a problem that could not be fixed in those days.) Lots of ruthless outlaws were still roaming the territory back in those days taking whatever they wanted. The injury had ended his wagon driving days and was when he signed on with the Pony Express as a Station Master.

"Earned \$60 a month tending to the station and horses," he said, picking up the slice of pie and breaking it in two. Johnny received half and nodded his appreciation. He always received half of whatever his aunt sent along for Max.

"It was a hard life. Had to be alert to the horn or shot twenty-four hours a day."

"Horn or shot? I don't understand," Johnny said.

"In the early months of the Express, the riders carried a horn – like a small bugle – They'd start tooting it a half mile out, the station master's signal to get a fresh horse saddled and out front for the switch. I kept five fresh horses there. Only occasionally needed all five in one day. Usually just had two riders a day. Later on, in an attempt to lighten the load for the horse, the horn got left behind and a single shot was fire in the air by the rider to let me know he was getting close. There really was no schedule. They left St Joe or Sacramento when they had a load and made their way across country as fast as they could. I'd have the horse out front, saddled and ready with a fresh canteen – headed in the direction the rider was goin'. He'd come in whoopin' and hollerin', be dismounted before the horse came to a full stop, flipped the mochila (Spanish for pouch) that carried the mail onto the new saddle and was mounted up and on his way in less than a half minute. Not much time for conversation. I only really ever

knew most of the boys by sight – nothin' about who they really was, you see.”

He looked off for a moment as if remembering some of those faces.

“Now, with Matt it was different.”

“Matt?” Johnny asked.

“Matt Roth, the rider who disappeared.”

Johnny nodded that he understood. Max continued.

“He overnighted here a few times a month. They were supposed to get fourteen hours off after each ten-hour ride. Seldom really worked that way. My station was at the end of level country in both directions so the riders made good time between the other stations and here – even better if they was being chased by the Paiute (the last Indian tribe to go on the war path in that section of the country – Nevada, actually).”

He chuckled his high-pitched chuckle as if such events had been humorous rather than dangerous. Johnny didn't understand, but didn't interrupt.

“At the end of one rider's day, a fresh rider would be here ready to take the mail and be on his way. The plan was a good one, but in practice the riders seldom knew where or when they'd be relieved. Sometimes they'd ride twenty hours straight.”

“Back to Matt,” Johnny said.

“Oh, yes. Well, Matt said he was seventeen, but my money says he wasn't a day over fifteen. Not sure how it started, but some of the richer folks soon began trying to buy special favors from the Station Masters – a few extra dollars for deliveries to places that weren't on the regular route. You have to understand that most of the mail our riders carried went all the way from one end of the route to the other – very little was addressed to places in between – a few of the large cities.

“Well, one time I knew I was going to have two fresh riders here at the same time – one would have at least a three-day layover. A rancher from just north of the station had been after me to take his messages south toward Red Bend. With the extra riders, I sent one up to his ranch for the pickup. It was Matt.

“It was a heavy document – the basic rate was for one

half ounce letters. That one was maybe ten times that. It was to go to the saloon owner down in Red Bend – don't remember his name, but did hear he died a few months later. I remember it was bigger than regulation – had to fold it in half long ways to make it fit in the mail pocket on the mochila.

“Matt took a fresh horse and set out south east across the plains. Only one set off hills to cross – those just north of Red Bend – Red Rock, I think they're called.”

“That's right. My aunt owns half of them – they form the northern border of her property.”

“It was a half day ride down there from the station. I expected him back in time so he could catch a few winks before heading out west three days later on his regular run. He never showed up. I contacted the rancher and the sheriff about it. The rancher was quite upset. The sheriff just shrugged his shoulders as if it wasn't important.

“That was in late July. The Express closed operations in October. As far as I know, nothing ever came of the investigation. Matt was a very good rider – careful, even, for his age. The company owners liked to hire boys in their teen years because they knew they'd take whatever risks were necessary to get the delivery through – it's a reckless age you're coming into, son.”

“That's what more than one grown up has told me – preached at me about it, really.”

Johnny grinned. Max nodded his head, taking Johnny's response as proof of the statement.

“So, the letter was going to the Saloon owner. Any idea what was it was?”

“Never seen it, myself. Matt said it was some sort of legal document – a deed he thought. Soon as he got back down to the station from the ranch he got a fresh mount, filled his canteen and headed out. Like I said, I never seen it.”

“Do you recall the name of the rancher or the saloon guy?”

Max shook his head.

“I might a knowed once, but I can't recollect anymore. Names come and go since I turned 80. If either one comes to mind, I'll write it down and save it for you. Might have been the double 'L' (LL) ranch come to think of it. North into

Nebraska.”

“And there was never any information or rumors about what happened to him – Matt?”

“Oh, there’s always rumors. Some said he was scalped by some renegade Paiute Indians who drifted east from Nevada. Doubt that. They was mostly after the men at three stations west of me. The Indians thought they had kidnapped some of their women. They made short work of that station, I’ll tell you that. I knowed those men and don’t doubt they probably did what the Indians said. Not the sort of justice I’d have wanted, but it was pretty effective – if they really was guilty. I suppose that won’t never be knowed.”

“So Matt probably wasn’t killed by Indians, then,” Johnny went on. “There were other rumors?”

“There was speculation Matt was over tired and fell off his mount killing him. If that had been the case that horse would have made its way back to one of the stations. That’s where he’d been fed and cared for. He’d have got back, for sure.”

“But he didn’t?”

“That’s right. I figure that means the horse was stole. Back then lots of lone riders was waylaid for their horses. Matt would have put up a fight, you know. Could a got himself killed doing it.”

“So, you don’t think it had anything to do with what he was carrying?”

“Can’t know that. No idea who knew Matt had it – the rancher and maybe the saloon owner. It hadn’t been a delivery long in the planning stage – just came up one night and that was that as far I know.”

“What did you know about Matt – personal things like where he was from, family and such?”

“Said he’d growed up in St. Joe, Missouri. Had it out with his paw over something and left home. Joined up with the Express when it was first hiring riders and had rode ‘til that final ride. Made as many runs as any rider they had. Never lost a single letter. The owners valued that. He told stories about Indian chases and being waylaid by gangs. Once he pulled into my station without any bullets left in his six-shooter or his belt. Told some tale about masked riders on his tail. I

gave him my gun and belt right there on the spot. Even with all that he made the transfer in under a minute. He was some rider. The men who were after him never showed up. I was ready for them with two rifles. Figured if they was after his horse they might come on in here where we had a half dozen in the corral.”

“Did that kind of thing happen often – bad guys try to take the horses from the riders or from the stations?”

“Too often. Can’t put a number on it.”

“Sounds exciting!”

“I suppose, if expecting to be dead at the hands of outlaws by sunset could be considered exciting.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that. Sorry. Didn’t mean to make light of it. I’ve read the books about the riders and the authors make it sound so thrilling. The riders always win in those stories. I guess mine will end differently, won’t it?”

“Matt might have died, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t win, son.”

Johnny didn’t immediately understand, but he’d think on it. That would certainly put an interesting twist on his story. It led him to ask another question.

“You said they stopped carrying the horn. What did they carry?”

“Like I said, the gun belt fully loaded and a six shooter – most preferred a long barrel – more accurate shootin’ at long distances and if they was ridin’ through a blaze of bullets or a flight of arrows they didn’t want to wait for the shooters to get close. They also carried one canteen of water. Most carried a hip pocket full of jerky and hard tack (crackers). They traveled light. To get hired they had to weigh less than 125 pounds stripped to their boots and long Johns. Most were short and skinny. It’s another reason they was usually not much more than boys.”

“You remember anything else about Matt?”

“Like I said he was a good horseman. His dad owned a livery stable in St. Joe so he’d been raised on horseback. He was a good-looking lad – like you. Told lots of stories involving girls he’d knowed. Said he was a good dancer. Can’t vouch for that, but girls do like good dancers. He had an uncle somewhere out here in Kansas. Must have lived close

to Red Bend because Matt had mentioned he was going to try and see him on that final trip he made.”

“Could it be he did visit him and his uncle convinced him to give up riding for you and stay with him?”

“I hadn’t never considered that possibility. Matt was a honest kid. I don’t think he’d have kept the Express horse – some was still bein’ hung for stealin’ horses back then.”

“How was he with a gun?”

“The best. Toss a coin in the air and he’d hit it four out of five times. Never saw him use a rifle. He could take care of himself in that department, though.”

“You say he was an honest sort so I imagine thinking he stole the document for some reason is out of the question.”

“Oh, my yes. Matt was a all ‘round good boy.”

“And yet he and his dad had it out over something,” Johnny said pushing for more if it was there to be had.

“Sometimes that’s as much on the paw as it is on the boy, you know. My paw and me couldn’t stand each other either, close up, day after day. Things got better between us once I left his roof behind me.”

The sun was soon straight up over head and Johnny had to start back. He made sure Diablo had drunk his fill and that his own canteen was full.

“Thanks for all the information, Max. I’d like to come back and hear more, if you’ll have me.”

“Of course. You know you’re always welcome. And, I’m always open to a good bribe. Make sure your Aunt understands that.”

They shared a smile. Max chuckled his distinctive chuckle and waved the boy on his way.

In his head, Johnny went over all the things he had learned. He would make notes once he got home. Lots more questions started to come to mind.

An hour later, as he and Diablo trotted up his aunt’s lane on the final leg of his return journey, he spied a familiar big horse tied out front. He urged Diablo to a gallop and had soon dismounted – trying it Pony Express fashion, hitting the ground before Diab had come to a full stop.

“Hey, Marshal man?”

“Hey, School Boy?” Cal kidded.

“So, you chasing bad guys out our way?”

“I smelled an apple pie in town and just followed my nose until I ended up out here.”

“A likely story. What’s really up?”

“Looks like I’ll have a couple of days off. Both my deputies are back in town. I thought it would be a good time for our ride down to Sandy Ford. Jake (one of his deputies) just returned from down there and says Hitch is alive and well and asking for me to come and visit.”

“Sounds great. I’ll need to let Doc and Cilla and the school know I’ll be out of town so they don’t think I’m playing hooky.”

“I already took care of that,” Cal said.

“Alright with you, Aunt Mae?”

“Of course. Tell Hitch hello from the prettiest girl in Red Bend.”

Johnny looked puzzled,

“That’s what Hitch used to all Bea,” Cal explained, “and he was right, you know?”

Johnny felt the Marshal had just put him on the spot. They both knew he thought Clair was the prettiest girl in town. Bea came to his rescue.

“Back in Hitch’s day, just being a girl qualified as pretty. There weren’t a lot of us around.”

Johnny still didn’t know how to respond. Bea was his aunt and aunts, like sisters and mothers, weren’t beauty queens to their nephews, brothers and sons.

“You going to just stand there with a dopey look on your face or are you going to get your bed roll, son,” the Marshal said. “Daylights burnin’.”

“Bed roll. Right. Be just a minute. Diablo needs to drink.”

“I’ll see to that. We need to be on our way. Want to be in Sandy by nightfall.”

While the fellows tended to their tasks, Aunt Bea put together a sack of food – enough for lunch and supper.

They were on their way south by two o’clock. Johnny liked spending time away from town with Cal. When they were in Red Bend, everybody in town thought they deserved a piece of his time – he never really seemed like he belonged to

Johnny. Out on the trail it was a different feeling. Johnny really missed his father and although he realized Cal was not a replacement, he met many of the requirements. It had become a comfortable relationship – for Cal as well although they never discussed such things. When two guys know they have a good thing between them, words about it aren't necessary. Girls, on the other hand, talk and talk and talk and . . . !

Johnny related the things he had learned from Max during the morning.

"The Matt kid had an uncle down here in the Red Branch area. Last name might have been Roth – that was Matt's name. Know of any Roths in the area?"

"Two Roth families I know – George and Carl. Could be George. As I recall he came west from Missouri as a young man. You said that was Matt's home territory. He has a small ranch south west of here. Not on the trail we're taking today, but we could return by his place if you want to."

"That would be great. Does he have family?"

"A wife. There were two daughters I think, but they're married and gone."

"How old a man?"

"Don't know him all that well. Mostly hearsay. I'd guess in his early sixties."

"I guess my first concern is Hitch – what's his last name again?"

"Harper. He was sheriff in Red Bend for a quarter of a century – 25 years is a long time to sheriff. He was the old-fashioned sort of lawman – shoot first and only talk as a last resort. Not many of that kind still around – well, not around here at least."

"How did you get to be his deputy?"

"I started out over in Topeka when I was twenty – way too early to trust a man with a badge and gun. I was just lucky to survive 'til I was twenty-five. When the sheriff over there retired, I figured it was time to move on. I didn't like cities. I heard Hitch was looking for a deputy so I picked up stakes and rode out – just showed up unannounced on his doorstep you could say."

"And got the job on your good looks?" Johnny asked,

smiling.

“He actually put me through the mill. Had me follow him around for a full month. He watched me on horseback and afoot. He watched me with a six gun and a rifle. He listened to me talking with the town’s folks and let me make a few arrests.

“One morning I walked in the door to the office and he was sitting behind his desk. He opened a drawer, tossed me a badge, got up and left. Didn’t see him again for two weeks.”

“He just left you in charge?”

“Sure did. Fortunately, nothing out of the ordinary came along. A year later he retired. Law enforcement was changing here in Kansas. The state was looking for a marshal for this territory. Hitch recommended me and back then when Hitch spoke people listened. I got the job. Fifty dollars a month and a room upstairs over the office.”

“And here you are.”

“Yup. Here I am.”

“Like the work?”

“Still here, you see.”

It was Cal’s way of answering without really committing himself to the words.

At five o’clock, Johnny asked the Marshal if he was hungry. Of course, that was really the boy’s way of saying he was starved. They found a grove of trees along a creek. While the horses grazed and drank – the way horses will do – Johnny and Cal, well, grazed and drank the way people will do. Fifteen minutes later they were back on the trail.

They entered Sandy Ford a little before seven.

“It really is a sandy ford,” Johnny said pulling up and pointing to the broad expanse of light brown sand that spread a path through the shallows of the creek.

“So, where’s Hitch?”

“South west corner of town – stone house with a stone stable out back. As I recall a white picket fence all around the property with huge shade trees front and back.”

“Sounds like a pretty spot,” Johnny said.

“It is, but don’t let Hitch hear you calling it ‘pretty’. He’d never allow himself to live in a ‘pretty’ place – you understand.”

Johnny smiled and nodded. The Main Street looked

pretty much like those in every other frontier town Johnny had ever seen – wooden buildings along a wide street flanked by raised, wooden, sidewalks. Dogs chased cats. Small boys chased dogs. Small girls chased boys. Ladies in fancy dresses went in and out of the stores. Men with guns strapped to their hips entered and left the saloon. Horses stood patiently where they were hitched to the railings along the street, their tails swatting at the flies that lit on their hind quarters. Dust rose and settled again as riders made their way along the hard-packed dirt street.

Soon the street would be empty, it happened everywhere when the stars and moon come out. The breeze would pick up and the air would cool – rapidly that time of the year – once the sun left the sky.

Johnny recognized the house from Cal's description. They tied up out front and were soon walking the stone path up to the front porch. Hitch's daughter, Jessica – Jessie for short – opened the door as they mounted the steps. She offered Cal a lingering hug that only Cal might misinterpret as 'just friendly'.

She ushered them inside to the front room – a large sitting room with a fireplace, and a variety of flowery settees (sofas), chairs, and tables draped in lace covers. The wide plank floor was covered here and there by hand braided rugs. There were large colorful peacock feathers sprouting up out of large, pink, vases which sat in the corners of the room. Frankly, Johnny thought, it really wasn't very manly. It looked more like a fancy lady's place than that of a retired gun fighter. How could he refer to it and still be honest about it?

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CHAPTER THREE

“I like your place,” Johnny finally managed. “Like a very substantial stone fortress right here guarding the prairie.”

Hitch smiled and nodded. The boy had clearly found exactly the right words to please the old man. (Johnny was known as a person who could do those sorts of things!)

Hitch and Cal spent time catching up. They offered a few stories about the old days and Jessie brought lemonade for Johnny and something stronger for the men. Eventually they got around to the purpose of the visit.

“Johnny, here, is a budding writer and he is interested in doing a story about one of the Pony Express riders – a boy named Matt Roth.”

Very pleased with the Marshal’s introduction, Johnny continued the explanation.

“He disappeared on an unauthorized ride from a Station up on the state line while he was traveling down to Red Bend. Hoped you’d have some knowledge about it.”

“I do recall it. Made a preliminary investigation even – the Station Master up there kept hounding me about it. What was his name? Mark, Mort?”

“Max,” Johnny said supplying it.

“Right, Max. I retraced the path the rider would have most likely taken and didn’t find anything. Spoke to a few folks who lived along the way. Several remembered seeing him – it wasn’t the usual thing to see a Pony Express rider in those parts so he stood out.”

“How could they have known he was a Pony Express rider?” Johnny asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Them riders was all interchangeable, son – short, skinny, tight pants, loose shirt, red bandana around the neck, broad brimmed hat strapped around the chin, and a long barrel six-shooter strapped down like a gun fighter. And they rode like . . . heck. Never saw one that wasn’t riddin’ faster than seemed reasonable by any sensible standard. Kids!”

“That’s good stuff, sir. Do you mind if I take notes?”

Hitch flitted his fingers in the boy’s direction – the universal gesture implying one doesn’t care – that it’s alright. Hitch sat up straighter as if Johnny’s comment had suddenly given him a new sense of importance. Cal winked at Jessie. She smiled and nodded in return. They had both caught it. Retirement was seldom a good thing for a man who’d lived the life Hitch had lived. He had always measured his worth by the amount of respect he was able to command from those around him. No one in Sandy Ford really knew about those days in the old man’s life.

“Any educated speculation about what might have happened to him?” Johnny went on.

“There were rumors. You can discount the Indian attacks. Could have been horse thieves – those Pony Express horses were the finest ever bred for long distance travel. Some thought it had to do with what he was carrying – some important document. Could be somebody was out to steal it or just didn’t want it to be delivered.”

“Max had good reason to think it was a deed of some kind.”

“That would fit with what I just said, I suppose. Don’t know about that, myself.”

“You remember who owned the saloon back then?”

“Sure do. Charlie Worth. He ended up at the bottom of the Red Rock hills north of town – broken neck. From a fall, doc said.

“Doc Weber?”

“Yup. He’d just come back to town. First sawbones we had in Red Bend. He grew up there, you know. When he come back he took up residence above the newspaper office. I told him it was no good for a doc to be upstairs. He said no doc he knew of could afford a place on the ground floor. He was probably right.”

“You investigate Charlie’s death?”

“Not much to investigate. He fell. He broke his neck. He died. Nobody seen nothin’ suspicious. Case closed.”

“I see. Who took over after that – the saloon, I mean?”

“Bart Weatherly – a bad apple. Always got what he wanted one way or another. Just kept the place a year and then moved on west to Hays over in Trego County. Not heard about him since. Good riddance I thought. He drew in a bad element. Always trouble in town while he owned the Saloon.”

“Did Charlie Worth have family?”

“Not that I know of locally. He was close to Millie Malone. She was the singer and dancer at the saloon and more than an employee if you get my drift. I figured they’d get hitched. He didn’t live long enough. Too bad. I liked him.

“Millie still around?”

“She eventually married a rancher – what was his name? George somebody. Had a small ranch about half way between Red Bend and Sandy Ford.”

“That wouldn’t be George Roth, would it?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. George Roth. How in tarnation did you know that?”

“It’s one of those one plus one things. I tend to be very good at them.”

Hitch turned to Cal, his brow furrowed, clearly not understanding.

Any idea what the boy’s talking about?”

“Johnny has a very logical mind. He connects facts that seem random to most of us and makes something meaningful out of them.”

Johnny continued as way of explanation.

“The Pony Express Rider was going to visit his uncle. The rider’s name was Matt Roth so I figured his uncle might have the same last name. The Marshal informed me about George who hailed from Missouri, where Matt was from. I just put one and one and one together and got Millie married George. I must admit it doesn’t always work that well.”

“You’d make a good lawman, son. Should consider it.”

“I appreciate your advice, sir, but I doubt if it’s one of the one plus ones in my own future.”

It was worth a smile and chuckle from the old man.

Jessie made dinner ('supper' at Aunt Bea's) and they retired by ten o'clock – in four poster beds with springs inside the mattresses and sheets and pillow cases that smelled of lavender (a strong perfume scent used by pretty ladies in those days). Johnny felt like he had returned to his first life back in Kansas City. He had to admit it made for a great sleep.

The next morning, after putting away a breakfast of fried potatoes, steak and eggs, they were back on the trail north by seven.

Jessie had sent them on their way with a saddlebag full of lunch. At ten they came upon the entrance to the Roth ranch, the G bar R (G – R). Not very original, Johnny thought, but probably very practical – using the owner's initials like that. If he ever had a ranch he'd call it the Flying J and the brand would be an upper-case J with wings at each side of the crossbar at the top of the J.

There was a wagon trail that entered the property from the road they had been traveling. They could see the house and corral in the distance.

"Smoke," Johnny said pointing. "Probably means they are home."

Cal nodded. Johnny had been correct.

They dismounted at the house and were immediately met by a toothless, skinny old man with a long, stringy beard.

"I'm Marshal Calvin from up at Red Bend. This is my young friend Johnny. Lookin' for George Roth. Would that be you?"

"No, sir. I'm Slim. George is inside. Just knock."

Slim turned and walked toward the corral. Johnny wondered how many 'Slims' there must be in Kansas. He ran out of fingers counting just the ones he knew. [The same could have been said for the number of 'Johnnys' but that hadn't entered his head.]

The woman of the house, Millie, answered the door.

"Ma'am," the Marshal said removing his hat. "I'm Cal Calvin, the Marshal from up in Red Bend. Slim said I'd find George here in the house. Oh, this is Johnny Baker. We're keeping each other company on the trail this week."

“Please come in. Yes, George is in his office. Follow me.”

Millie made the introductions. The men – all three of them – shook hands. It made Johnny feel important to be included like that.

“We don’t intend to take up much of your time,” Cal began, “but a question has come up regarding a young man who disappeared nearly twenty years ago – Matt Roth. We understand he had an uncle in this area and wonder if that might be you or if you have any information that might be helpful in our search.”

“Yes. Matt was my nephew. He rode for the Pony Express. I heard he had disappeared. Felt terrible. Sent my condolences to his father – my brother. Hadn’t had any contact with that part of the family for 25 years. I’ve had none since.”

Clearly there was some problem between brothers that neither Cal nor Johnny thought was probably any of their business.

“Matt would have been welcome here. Can’t say I really knew him but I had no ill will against him.”

“It sounds like you weren’t expecting him – Matt – at the time he disappeared,” Cal said.

“Not really, nothing specific. I got a letter from him soon after he became a rider. He said he was riding the route just north of here and if he had a chance he’d drop in sometime. Do you know if that’s why he was coming down this way?”

Johnny explained.

“He was making a private delivery for a rancher from just over the Nebraska border. To somebody in Red Bend, best we can figure. So, you really have no information about anybody that might have it in for him or the family, then?”

“Oh, lots of folks had it in for them – for Matt’s father at least. It was well known he dealt in stolen horses. I’m not saying he was a thief – just that thieves knew he’d take good horse flesh off their hands without asking questions. He turned a pretty profit – buy cheap and sell high. Only took quality stock. It’s what split up the family.”

“Anybody in particular who would have it out for him?”

Cal asked.

“If you mean do I have a name? No, but any rancher who’s had a rustler problem in eastern Kansas or western Missouri might have good reason to go after him. If there wasn’t a market for stolen horses, horses wouldn’t be stolen.”

“Well, thank you. We won’t take up any more of your time.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be of any help. Did they ever find out what happened to the boy – Matt?”

Johnny answered.

“No, Sir. That’s what I’m trying to do – for a school project. When I get the mystery solved, I’ll let you know the facts in the matter.”

“I could put up some money if that would help.”

“Oh, no, please. I don’t need money. Just a little time and maybe some good luck.”

They left. Johnny spoke as they rode back out toward the road.

“I hope I didn’t offend him by refusing his offer of money. It just seems everywhere I go people try to give me money and the amount I already have is a big enough headache. I sure don’t want any more to have to have to take care of!”

Cal chuckled to himself. Johnny was a one, for sure (one of a kind).

At noon, they stopped by a creek and made short work of the lunch Jessie had sent with them.

“I’m going to catch forty winks, Johnny. That bed I had last night was so soft I couldn’t get any sleep. Should have got up and slept on the floor I guess.”

“You catch your forty. That’ll give me a chance for a short swim. I need to get that perfume smell from the pillow out of my hair before I get to school tomorrow. It wouldn’t do for the other guys to smell lavender on me.”

It was worth more chuckles from Cal. Johnny had been dead serious so really didn’t understand the reaction.

With Cal’s forty winks finished and Johnny’s hair perfume-free, they headed north east toward Red Bend. Johnny pointed toward the north.

“A dust cloud.”

“It’s a herd heading up to the railhead south of Red Bend.”

“Must take a lot of cows to send up a cloud like that. Looks like it stretches on for a mile or more.”

“They vary from 1,500 to 3,000 head.”

“It doesn’t look like its moving.”

“They move the cattle at a pretty slow pace so they can graze along the way. Moving fast they’d lose weight and since they’re sold by weight that wouldn’t be good.”

“The cowboys will probably be in town soon, then,” Johnny said (another one plus one!).

“A week, I’d guess.”

“How many cowboys does it take to drive a herd like that?”

“A dozen – two for the larger herds.”

“I’d think their horses would get really tired, carrying a rider all day.”

“Each rider has three horses. The ones that aren’t being used are cared for by the wrangler – usually a young guy. He trails the herd with the horses. It’s really a pretty important job on a cattle drive.”

“What does a cowboy earn?”

“Depends – about \$25 a month plus free grub and horses to ride.”

“Not much,” Johnny said surprised at the amount.

“Well, they don’t have anything to spend it on so unless they blow it all on drink and women at the end of the drive, they have a tidy sum saved up.”

“How long does it take to drive a herd to the railhead?”

“Lots of the herds come all the way up from Texas, across the Indian territory (Oklahoma). Takes two months for some of them.”

“Two months of dirt and grime. I imagine they could use some of that lavender I just left in the creek back there.”

They exchanged a smile.

“Hitch used to say he could smell a band of cowboys two miles away. Gave him time to round up his deputies to get ready for them.”

“I’m beginning to understand something Niles said to me – an eighth grader. He said when the drives come through

he makes lots of money carrying water for the tubs in the backroom of the barbershop.”

“The dance hall ladies won’t pay any attention to men who smell bad. They hit the tubs right after downing that first shot of whiskey.”

“It sounds like a hard life.”

“I’d say it’s a wearin’ life – wears a guy down being out in the sun and dust week after week.”

“Will we try to beat them? Looks like our paths will cross in about a half hour if we keep to this pace.”

“Good thinking.”

They urged their mounts into an easy gallop. Diablo loved to run so he was clearly pleased with the change of pace. Gray – Cal’s horse – was older and, although he’d do whatever the Marshal asked of him, it wasn’t done with any degree of enthusiasm.

Fifteen minutes later a lone rider came toward them, keeping to a fast pace and a route suggesting he was trying to intercept them. Cal slowed them to a walk and then stopped as the rider came close. When he saw the Marshal’s badge he seemed relieved.

“Marshal. Got a bad hurt kid with the drive. Did battle with a coyote last night protectin’ the horses. Cookie done his best, but the boy needs a doc. [The cooks doubled as medics on cattle drives and that skill was as much of a qualification as how well they could cook.]

“Take us to him,” Cal said.

They crossed the distance to the rear of the herd in record time. The boy’s right leg and arm had been badly chewed up. He was unconscious and as pale as sun bleached limestone.

“We got a doc up in Red Bend – a two-hour ride. Got a team and wagon we can use?”

“Give me five minutes.”

“Cookie fixed a bed of blankets in the back of the open wagon and put in several water sacks [canvas bags used in place of metal canteens. They tended to keep the water cooler.] .

“Runnin’ a ragin’ fever,” Cookie said. “Need to keep wet cloths on him. Here’s a jar of willow bark tea. Get him to drink

it when you can. It'll help take down that fever."

"Johnny, you ride with him in the back," Cal said. "We'll tie the horses to the wagon. I'll drive."

"Best fresh dray horses we got," Cookie said. [A dray was a cargo delivery wagon and the horses that pulled them were bigger and stronger than a cowpokes horse.] You can run 'em all the way. The kid's a half-breed, you see, but still, nobody deserves what happened to him."

The comment really bothered Johnny because it implied a half-breed (one parent white and one Indian) was worth less – less deserving of care – than a white person. He'd have liked to debate the point, but understood it was not the time for it.

Johnny changed the wet cloths regularly and did the best he could to seep some of the tea between the boy's lips every so often. He understood it was a good thing that the boy remained unconscious because the pain, when awake, was going to be horrific (terrible, times ten).

Diab hated being tied to a wagon, but he seemed to sense it was the way things had to be. As long as he could keep his important person in sight he'd put up with it. Gray just accepted things and trotted along at the end of the tether.

From time to time the boy would groan and turn his head from side to side. Johnny assumed that meant he was feeling the pain. He began talking to him, not knowing if he could hear him or not.

"You been hurt doing a very brave thing. We are taking you the best doc in central Kansas. It won't be long. You just need to hang in there. When I put the jar to your lips you need to try to swallow the tea. It will help make you feel better."

Johnny had been holding the boy's left hand. He felt the boy squeeze it and assumed that indicated that he was hearing at least some of what he was saying. He continued talking the entire trip. Cal could hear, of course, and was genuinely impressed with his calm demeanor (manner) and his ability to choose just the right things to say – boy to boy things.

As they hit the edge of Main Street Cal fired three shots in the air. It was the universal signal back then to warn of an emergency. As the wagon pulled to a stop in front of the

newspaper office, several people hurried to meet them – one of the deputies, Cilla, Harry Carter the livery owner and several men who had been passing down the street. Doc looked down from upstairs and disappeared to prepare a place to work on the boy.

Cal lifted him out of the wagon and carried him up the stairs to doc's office. Johnny darted ahead of him to shoo away a cat and open doors and such. The other men saw to the horses and wagon.

Johnny began the explanation even before Cal had laid the boy on the examination table. The deputy followed them into the room. Doc addressed him first.

"We'll need a block of ice from the ice house."

The deputy left.

"Johnny, a bucket of water. Cal, cut off his boot – can't chance pulling it off for fear of damaging the torn flesh above it."

Johnny returned with the water and received another order.

"Go to the saloon and get three bottles of 100 proof anything. I'll need lots of alcohol to clean out these wounds."

Johnny was down the stairs and across the street in nothing flat.

"How old, you think, Cal?" Doc asked as he removed his own jacket and rolled up his sleeves preparing for a long session.

"Can't be more than fifteen."

"The wrangler, I suppose," Doc said, understanding that job usually fell to young, lower class, men or boys.

[In that time and place a half-breed was considered among the lowest of the lower social class. They often worked for food and water as they just struggled to survive. They were treated poorly. It bothered Johnny – a lot. He had not come across the concept of half-breed back in Kansas City. He had been taught that all people were precious and worthy of respect and dignity. Whether half-breed or whole-breed, he figured the person had no choice in the matter of what he was in the first place so it made no sense to harass him about it. – End of Johnny's sermon!]

CHAPTER FOUR

Once the supplies arrived in doc's office, Cal and the deputy left. Johnny stayed.

"Will your Aunt be concerned if you don't get home?" Doc asked, as he continued to clean the wounds.

"I gave myself three days – not knowing how long things would take. It'll be alright."

"Do you know the boy's name?"

"No. I thought about that after we left the drive. I've been talking to him the whole way. A couple of times he squeezed my hand. I took that as a good sign."

Doc nodded and continued. He'd point at what he needed – gauze, rags, scalpel, tweezers – and Johnny would hand it to him. A half hour later Doc spoke.

"If he'll just stay unconscious for another half hour, the worst of the pain I'm inflicting on him will be over. I just have to close the wounds now – lots of stitches, tape and gauze. This lad has a lot of healing to do. He'll need a place to stay and be looked after for some time. A cattle drive's not the place for him."

"You know that Aunt Bea and I'll take him in. He can have my bed and I'll use my bed roll."

"You can check that out with your aunt later. He'll need to stay right here for a number of days. Maybe you and Cilla can spell each other up here when I have other patients or have to be gone."

"Of course. I expect her to pop in any minute now. She has a way of knowing just when she's needed. I remember how she took care of me when I was recovering

from that slug in my chest.”

As if by magic, Cilla entered the office.

“Oooo! That poor young man. A coyote, I hear.”

“That’s the story I got,” Johnny said.

“I can verify it,” Doc said. “The animal did lots of damage, but fortunately didn’t make off with much flesh. It’s all here. I just have to put it all back where it belongs.”

“Give me the brief version, Johnny,” Cilla said. “I’ll get an article put together for the paper. Still have three inches at the bottom of page one.”

Johnny thoughtfully laid out what he had been told.

“I don’t know his name or what ranch he was working for. Cal may know the Ranch from the brand – Bar X (- X).”

She made some notes on a pad, then said: “I can take the first night shift. Be back about nine, alright?”

“I’ll appreciate it,” Doc said. “This is not going to be an easy night. I’ll get a deputy to stay, too. When he wakes up the pain will be so bad he’ll have to be held down. Can’t bind him to the bed with sheets like we did with Johnny because of the extent of the injury. It’ll take a good-sized man with a strong stomach for screaming and profanity.”

“In that case, maybe I should stay,” Johnny said. “A lady like Cilla shouldn’t be exposed to such words.”

“Son. That first night you were here Cilla and I heard you string cuss words together in ways we’d never even considered was possible.”

“Swear words? Me?”

Doc just nodded.

“But I don’t swear?”

“I guess you just keep them locked down deep inside for special occasions, then.”

Doc and Cilla got a chuckle out of the remark.

“I apologize, Cilla,” Johnny said.

“No need. I’ve heard worse, just never so artfully arranged.”

Johnny was clearly embarrassed. Cilla spoke to him.

“I’ll go take care of some things I need to get done and then bring up supper. Can you stay and sit with him ‘til I can get back?”

“Of course. I already feel like I know him.”

* * *

Doc had been right. It was a very difficult night – much like the one Johnny had suffered through several months before.

Back home, Johnny slept poorly. He and Aunt Bea had rearranged things in his little room to make ready for the patient. They moved his bedside table into the kitchen to make room on the floor for his bedroll. She began making chicken and tomato soups and planning menus suitable for a recovering patient. Johnny cut a supply of willow bark and his aunt boiled it to leach the medicinal chemical out of it. [Willow bark contains qualities similar to modern day aspirin and lowered fevers and eased aches and pains. For hundreds of years, Indians had been chewing it for relief. The white men made it into tea and later into tablets.]

Johnny was back in town at seven the next morning. Cilla left to get some sleep. The deputy and doc were asleep in his two big chairs by the windows up front in the bedroom. The patient was not awake; whether still just unconscious or asleep Johnny didn't know. He'd have to ask Doc what the difference was. The boy lay there on his back taking long, deep, uneven breaths. Johnny changed the wash rag on his forehead and the towel on his chest. The ice was long gone, but seemed to have done its job. He wasn't nearly as hot as he'd been when they first encountered him.

Doc had told Johnny once that a little fever was a good thing because it worked to kill the germs that were making the person ill. He supposed it worked in a similar way with the infection there in the cuts and bruises. It was the first-time Johnny had really had taken time to look him over. His lower right arm had been slit from the wrist up to the front of the elbow. The flesh was torn loose in several places. His upper leg was in a similar state. It more resembled something you'd see in a butcher shop than on a teen age boy. Johnny shuddered.

The boy began to groan. It was barely audible, but his forehead furrowed also indicating pain. Johnny took the boy's left hand in both of his and called gently to Doc.

"He may be coming to, Doc. Not sure what to expect, here."

Doc was soon by his side.

“Cilla got a good amount of tea down him last night. I imagine the pain will have subsided considerably – not gone by any means – but less. You remember how that was. It’s good you are here for him.”

The boy’s eyelids flickered, but remained closed. He licked at his lips. Instinctively, Johnny wet them with a rag. They were parched (dry and scaly) from the fever. Doc brought an ointment and handed the little, flat, jar to Johnny who gently applied it to the lips and cheeks.

Doc watched, more convinced than ever that he had a natural doctor in young Johnny. He had all the right instincts.

Johnny began talking in a low, calm voice.

“I don’t know what you remember. You were hurt by a coyote. Now you are in a doctor’s office. My name is Johnny. I’m just a few years younger than you, I think. Doc has you all cleaned up and bandaged so you can begin healing. It’s your right arm and leg that got hurt so you must keep them still. I have to count on you to do that for me – don’t try to move them.

“I know it’s a scary thing, but you’re in the best hands in this part of the state and we’re going to see that you heal up right good.” (He smiled to himself that he had just used the frontier term ‘right good’ so naturally.)

“If you’re awake and hearing me, why don’t you give my hand a little squeeze.”

Johnny demonstrated with a small squeeze of his own. It was immediately returned. He turned his face up toward Doc and nodded, then returned his attention to the boy.

“Like I said, my name is Johnny. Doc Weber is here, too. We’d sure like to know what your name is.”

The boy’s jaw and lips began to move – first just in random ways, silently. Presently they heard him whisper, “Jericho”.

“Jericho. That’s a great name. I’m really Jonathon – Johnny for short. May I call you Jerry for short?”

The boy nodded – barely – and the slightest hint of a smile appeared at the edges of his mouth. His eyes struggled open, squinting, even in the subdued light of Doc’s bedroom. He moved his gaze toward Johnny and squeezed his hand

again – demonstrating a bit more strength that time.

“I feel like hell,” he said.

“You look like hell,” Johnny said back.

It brought a much broader smile to the boy’s face. He looked up at Doc who had bent close to get a good look into his eyes. Doctors seemed to be able to tell a great deal about a patient by looking into their eyes.

“I’m Doc Weber. I need to be honest with you. You have been very badly hurt, but I have every reason to believe things are going to be alright after a while. It will take weeks of rest. You are going to have to be patient.”

“Cookie?” the boy asked.

It had been in reference to the cook back with the herd.

“He took the best care of you he knew how,” Johnny said, realizing Doc couldn’t understand the reference. “He knows you’re here with us.”

The boy nodded ever so slightly and closed his eyes.

Doc pointed to the tea. Johnny understood.

“Before you go back to sleep I’d like for you to drink some of my tea – it’s medicine, really, and has already helped bring down your fever and ease your pain.”

He opened his eyes and Johnny raised his head while Doc put the cup to his lips. He drank a considerable amount. He was clearly thirsty as he should have been going so long without any significant amount of water.

With his head back on the pillow, he was immediately asleep. Doc spoke to the deputy.

“Looks like your duty is over. Thanks for being here over night. Tell Cal I’m ordering you – as your doctor – to go to bed and sleep the clock around.”

They exchanged smiles and the deputy donned his hat and left. Johnny moved to stand, but Jericho would not release his hand. Johnny pointed for Doc’s benefit and shrugged, sitting back down on the stool beside the bed. It appeared he had a new friend.

Jericho – Jerry – slept until noon. Cilla had brought soup and bread. When Jerry awakened, he looked around, plainly puzzled at first, then nodded, apparently remembering from before.

“I got soup for you,” Johnny said. “Doc says you need

to eat and take in lots of liquid. Let me put another pillow behind your head. That'll make eating easier."

He arranged the pillows. Doc heard Johnny talking. He was back in the front room, but moved to the door to see what was going on. Johnny saw him.

"We're about to have supper, breakfast and lunch all at once here, Doc. His fever seems to be holding steady – maybe even down a little."

Doc nodded and walked over and put his hand on the boy's forehead. He nodded again.

"Down a little. Good sign. Let me know if you need anything."

He returned to the front room.

Johnny began breaking off small pieces of bread and dipping them in the soup. It was an easier way to 'drink' the soup than using a spoon or cup. His mother had done it that way when he was younger.

Jerry ate with no hesitation, clearly hungry as well as thirsty. Good signs, Johnny felt sure. At one point the boy tried to feed himself with his left hand, but soon realized he had neither the strength nor the coordination to pull it off. Johnny was happy to continue for him and saw it as an indication the boy was used to taking care of himself – a streak of independence, probably.

"Like I said, (for the third time!) I'm Johnny. Lived here in Red Bend for about six months. Lots of good people here. I live with my Aunt – Great Aunt, really. I don't have parents. You said your name was Jericho."

The boy smiled.

"Jerry. Nobody never called me that before. I like it."

"Jerry, it is, then. You have a last name? Mine is Baker, by the way.

"Blackfeather."

Although it was not the Smith or Jones or Yates or Purdy that Johnny was expecting, he nodded his head and just accepted it without any questions. There would be time for that later. He put his arm up next to Jerry's.

"Wish I had your tan. It's great!"

"My father was a full blood Pawnee. Come by the tan naturally."

Johnny nodded. It helped explain the last name – Blackfeather.

“My father was English,” Johnny said. “Not sure what it explains about me.”

Jerry continued.

“My mother was white – don’t know nothin’ more about her.”

Johnny noted he spoke of both his parents in the past tense so assumed they were no longer alive. Again, the details could wait. He felt the need to complete his side of the exchange, however.

“My mom was from a German family. I don’t know much about them, either.”

Jerry looked around the room.

“I won’t never be able to pay for this. I need to get back to the herd.”

“First, nobody will ever ask you to pay anything. Second, you’re in no shape to go back to the herd. You’d just be a burden to them. You are going to stay with my Aunt and me until you heal and regain your strength. Her name is Bea. She’s old, like doc, but like him, she’s really not slowed down much.”

In the other room, Doc chuckled to himself about Johnny’s characterization.

Jerry was too weak to argue although in his mind he would be leaving just as soon as he had regained enough strength. Jericho took care of himself. Jericho earned his way. Jericho pulled his fair share of the weight. That was who he was as far as he was concerned. He would not allow others to think of him as a charity case.

He managed to eat his way through two pieces of sop [the bread dipped in soup] and drink a cup of water before falling back asleep. He slept until nearly sundown.

In and among keeping the rags wet and cool, Johnny busied himself making notes and writing a list of questions he needed to answer before he could really begin finishing his story. He revisited what he had already written – an introduction with background about the characters – and with only a few changes figured it could stand pretty much as he had written it. As he learned more about Matt’s background he

would go back and 'fix' things.

Originally, he had started the story by just writing down that background information – where the rider had been born, why he became a rider and things like that. It seemed pretty dry and uninteresting. His Aunt had asked if there were some way he could begin the story with more of a bang. Here is how Johnny used her suggestion.

At that moment, Flash, Matt's beautiful, coal black mare, needed to live up to her name. Through the dust, she was kicking up there on the trail, he could barely make out the three men closing on him from the rear, guns blazing. If he took out his six-shooter and turned to return fire, he would slow the horse, so he bent low along her long, sleek, neck and urged her on.

Up ahead was a low hill with large rock outcroppings on both sides of the trail. His quick young mind immediately had a plan. When he passed the first of them he pulled Flash to the right and dismounted, leading her to relative safety in the deep shadows behind the largest of them. The evening breeze blew the dust she had kicked up on down the trail some distance. The riders rushed on by.

Matt led Flash down the rise to the north and took refuge in a deep gully. If the riders were able to find him, he was in perfect position to fire on them before they could get to him.

Johnny nodded to himself thinking his story was off to a very good start – a 'big bang' as his Aunt had termed it. He figured that from there, the story could take any turn it needed to take in order to be true to whatever he learned about Matt's real story. He'd feed the background information into the story later on.

Cilla arrived with supper and Johnny caught her up to date on what he had learned about the boy. He still didn't know his age or where he was from or how he came to be a part of the cattle drive, but those things would come out later he was sure.

Jerry was still sleeping when Doc suggested that Johnny better be getting back home – it was late and the sky looked like it might be cooking up a late fall wind storm. That was not something he'd want to have to endure even for just

the half mile ride home.

He went back to the bed and spoke to his sleeping friend.

“I gotta go now, Jerry. Cilla’s here and Doc will be with you through the night. I’ll come back in the morning.”

Jerry opened his eyes and looked around. Johnny felt it was appropriate for him to make the introduction.

“This is Cilla – I’ve spoken about her – the newspaper lady. She’ll be here over night with you. She was here last night, also.”

Jerry’s brow furrowed signaling he really couldn’t understand why so many strangers seemed so willing to take care of him. It wasn’t something he could put into words, but Johnny got his message. Clearly, the boy’s life had not been filled with caring people who tried to make things go well for him. It would take a good deal of explanation, and that was not the time or place.

Johnny turned to Cilla and Doc.

“I’m thinking he’s ready for something more substantial than soup. He’s a growing boy not some sick little pup.”

Jerry managed a smile and raised his hand out toward Johnny. Johnny took it and held it for a moment before placing it back down on the bed. He turned to the others.

“You take good care of my friend here. I’m expecting a detailed report from him in the morning about your behavior.”

It was reason for another smile from the boy. It came partly from the amusing words, partly from knowing he would be well taken care of and partly from just hearing Johnny refer to him as his friend. It may have been the first time he had heard that term used in that way.

As Johnny left, Cilla was thin-slicing a slab of ham and doc was mixing a spoon full of butter into some mashed potatoes. He felt sure his new friend was about to feast on some real food.

Although Johnny had just put away a supper at Docs, consisting of two ham sandwiches, a plate full of mashed potatoes and a bowl of beans in brown sugar sauce, he hoped Aunt Bea had something wonderfully sweet awaiting him when he got home. [Any bets?]

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CHAPTER FIVE

A week had passed. Jerry had hit a rough spot and was still at Docs. Finally, his fever broke and Doc was willing for him to move out to Johnny and Aunt Bea's. She would bring the buggy into town at noon.

Johnny arrived again at seven, just like he had every morning. Jerry was still sleeping.

"He had a good night," Cilla said, gathering her things preparing to leave. Only woke up twice."

They were talking in low tones in the front room. If Jerry had sensed that Johnny were there he'd have awakened. Johnny had another topic to discuss.

"Do you two remember back to when Charlie Worth, the owner of the Saloon, died?"

They both nodded. Doc spoke.

"I hadn't been back in town from my medical studies for more than a week. He was found dead on the north side of the Red Rock hills – the other side from Bea's place. Neck broken. Other things indicated he had fallen quite a distance – smashed skull and other broken bones in his shoulders yet very few abrasions or scratches. Took a clean header from up forty feet or more I figured."

"I remember how Millie – a girl who he was seeing – was devastated," Cilla said. "She suggested there may have been foul play. I tried to get more specifics out of her but she couldn't produce any. Just that Charlie had told her they would soon be rich and he'd build her a mansion with the biggest silver chandelier (large, fancy light fixture) in the state of Kansas. It wasn't that she was so sorrowful about. She

really loved him.”

“Did she say anything that led you to think he was expecting a special letter or package – document?”

“Not that I remember,” she said.

Doc shook his head confirming Cilla’s response.

“Do you know how Bart Weatherly came to own the saloon next?”

Doc answered.

“Charlie had only one living relative – an aunt in Kansas City. She inherited the place and had it auctioned off and Bart bought it.”

“Was Bart from around here?” Johnny asked.

“No. Kansas City, I believe,” Cilla said. “As I recall he just happened to be in town the day of the auction.”

“Any idea why he took an interest in the Saloon here?”

The other two shook their heads clearly having never really ever considered it before.

“When did Worth’s death take place in relation to Matt’s disappearance?”

It was Cilla who answered: “After, but not long after – a week at the most. Matt’s disappearance wasn’t generally known about here in Red Bend. The sheriff didn’t even get in on it ‘til later. You suspect a connection between the two?”

“Just collecting information.”

The others raised their eyebrows understanding that’s all they were going to get for the time being.

“What kind of a guy was Worth?” Johnny asked.

“Smart, honest, well liked, ran an up and up place,” Doc said. “Didn’t tolerate bad behavior in the saloon. Some men even took their wives there for dancing. If he had a fault it was that he was a gambler.”

“I’m not sure why you call it a fault,” Cilla said. “He won a whole lot more often than he lost.”

“I guess I just don’t think risking everything on the turn of a card is a responsible way to live.”

Cilla shrugged her shoulders and wasn’t about to debate that sort of logic.

“Do you suppose the riches he told Millie about had to do with gambling winnings?” Johnny asked.

“Could be, I suppose,” Doc said. “I don’t know anything

to suggest one way or the other.”

“How about Bart?”

“Not so much,” Cilla said. “In fact, I don’t think he gambled at all – not at the saloon at least.”

“I’m uninformed about deeds. What exactly is a deed?”

“A deed is proof you own something – a piece of property, usually,” Doc said.

“And what makes it legal?”

“Two people sign it – one agreeing to sell to the other and the other agreeing to buy. A sales amount is agreed to by the signatures.”

“And,” Cilla added, “there are usually the signatures of one or more witnesses swearing they saw the two parties sign the deed.”

“How many copies?”

“Three is typical – sometimes fewer,” Doc said. “One for each of the parties involved and one is kept on file in the county office. Only the one in the possession of the owner is official.”

“County office?”

“Like in the county court house. This county hasn’t got one so such legal documents are kept by the county judge.”

“Alright. Thanks for the education. I guess we can assume that’s my school time for the day,” Johnny said, smiling back and forth between them.

“The day?” Doc said. “More like the week, from the lack of work that’s come my way to look over.”

“I’ve been working on the story up here all week while Jerry’s been sleeping. I’m at the point I need to do some field research.”

“And all the questions about deeds . . . ?” Cilla asked.

“Max said Matt was probably carrying a deed from a rancher in Nebraska to somebody here in Red Branch. It would have needed to be worth a lot of money to be sent that way – probably cost somebody twenty-five or more dollars. From what you’ve told me it appears somebody may not have received a deed to something that they paid for. Or, somebody didn’t have to give up some piece of property they’d signed away because the deed never made it to its destination – to the new owner.”

“Interesting speculation,” Doc said. “Hard to prove any of that.”

“One more question. I have heard of people winning and losing property in poker games. Is there a deed needed when that happens?”

“Usually the loser writes out a temporary deed and signs it. When witnessed, those slips of paper are considered legal. Often, though, later the legal document is drawn up.”

“Do Nebraska ranchers drive herds down to the railhead south of Red Bend?”

Cilla answered.

“Not often. It’s usually more practical to just drive herds from up there straight east across Iowa to the slaughter houses in Chicago. During the past decade, some good railroads have been built across eastern Nebraska that connect that area with Chicago.”

“Thanks. I’ll tuck away all your good information. Jerry had breakfast yet? Of course, he hasn’t. He’s still asleep. So, what’s the breakfast plan?”

“I’ll bring him something. He seems to like the same three B’s that most cowpokes like: beans, bacon, and biscuits.”

“Guess I’d fit right in – with the occasional steak, and cake, and pie and cookies and ham and . . . well, you get the idea.”

Cilla left. Jerry awakened as soon as Johnny entered the room.

“You’re coming home with me today,” Johnny said. “Aunt Bea will be here with the buggy at noon. You’ll really like her and the delicious food she cooks. We’ve rearranged my room so we’ll both have places to sleep at night. It’s going to be great.”

“I don’t know. I can’t get used to this sleeping inside a house. You got a stable? I’d be more comfortable in a stable or a barn.”

“Well, I wouldn’t, and since Doc has charged me with seeing to your needs over the next couple of weeks, you’ll just have to put up with sleeping in a bed in a house.”

“Yes, sir, boss,” came Jerry’s reply not entirely friendly in tone.

“Hey. I intended it as at least partly humorous and I’m not your boss and I hope I still have at least twenty years before kids start calling me sir. We’ll make it work, you’ll see.”

“I really think I ought to be getting back to the herd. Mr. Black – he’s the trail boss – said I could go back to the ranch with him and he’d give me a job. It’s the best offer I’ve ever had. I don’t dare pass it up.”

“I’ll see if the Marshal knows anything about where the herd is. I imagine it must be really close to the railhead by now. The cowhands haven’t come into town yet and they always come in once the drive is over. When they do, we’ll find your Mr. Black and see what we can work out.”

Jerry appeared to feel better about things after that little talk.

After he finished a breakfast of bacon, beans and biscuits, Doc entered the bed room.

“I want you to begin doing a set of exercises twice a day, Jericho – easy at first and then gradually increase the effort. Johnny can help. I’ll tell you up front that they will hurt like sin, but if you don’t do them you’ll end up living with a stiff leg and arm for the rest of your life. Lots of muscle was damaged and these exercises will help rebuild it. Be prepared to keep at them for the next six months.”

“He’ll do it, right?” Johnny said/asked looking the boy in his eyes.

Jerry nodded with some reluctance.

During the next half hour Doc went through the exercises with Jerry, pointing out to Johnny various important aspects of how to do them and how long to hold the positions. Some had been the same ones as Johnny had done after the bullet had been removed from his chest. It was obvious that the new movements produced a lot of pain, but Jerry gritted his teeth and completed every one. Johnny remembered how that was and he hurt for his new friend, but he understood he had returned to perfect health because he had been willing to stick with them. He’d do whatever it took to keep Jerry on track.

When they had finished, Jerry lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. He continued to breathe hard for some time.

“I don’t get it,” Johnny said to him, taking a seat on the

stool beside the bed.

Jerry opened his eyes and turned his head so he could look at Johnny.

“Don’t get what?” he asked in response.

“The first time I did those arm exercises I cried like baby. I kept at them, but I had such a tear drenched chest I didn’t have to take a bath for a week. I know how badly it hurt. I just don’t get it?”

“Pawnee men don’t cry.”

The answer was simple and seemed to need no further explanation. Johnny didn’t press. Silently he was both impressed and saddened at the same time. Impressed with the boy’s obvious courage but saddened that he had learned he had to deny his legitimate emotions. It was like he was missing out on an important part of being human. It was a topic to think about and to discuss later on.

One thing had become clear for the first time – Jerry thought of himself as Pawnee. He wore his dark hair in long pigtailed and it and his beautiful skin color were certainly Pawnee. His features blended the Indian and White characteristics in a way that gave him a very handsome presence. He was tall and slender. His well-developed muscles and calloused hands and feet suggested he had worked hard all his life. There were several lash marks – scars – on his back. Doc said they had probably been put there by a mean-spirited employer or care giver several years before. The Pawnee would never discipline a child in that manner. Johnny could not imagine how one person could treat another in such a fashion. It suggested he had been separated from his father for at least several years.

Doc stuck his head in the door.

“As soon as you’re feeling up to it I’d like to have you do the stairs outside – down and back up once. Take your time. Then you should rest a while before moving on with Johnny. I want you to come back and let me see how you’re doing in a few days. I’ll count on Johnny to make that decision.”

They did the stairs, and afterward Jerry slept for an hour before Aunt Bea arrived. Johnny was keeping watch out the front window and spotted her as she and the buggy

entered Main Street from the east.

“She’s here. Let me go down and help her get her shopping done. Then I’ll come back for you.”

Johnny was soon down to the street tying the horse to the rail in front of the general store. He helped his Aunt to the ground – as if she had not been doing that for herself all those years before he came into her life. It made Johnny feel manly and Bea truly appreciated that he wanted to help.

She had just a few things to pick up – a slab of bacon and a sack of flour. Johnny had relayed Jerry’s food preferences to her. She had brought in several bushels of apples and Johnny set them down on the sidewalk. Anybody who wanted some could help themselves.

“I have no idea how Jericho – Jerry – will respond to you, Aunt Bea. He doesn’t speak about his parents. He is quite uncomfortable about accepting your – our – hospitality. It seems that he has not often been treated with kindness just because others wanted to be kind to him. I can’t imagine how hard his life has been. I feel so lucky about my own.”

Aunt Bea didn’t comment, but privately admired her nephew for being able to think about his life as having been good: he had lost both parents, been transplanted into a totally foreign way of life, and nearly died at the hands of an outlaw’s bullet. It brought a tear to her eye. Johnny noticed, but having no way of understanding why it had appeared, he let it go.

When Johnny arrived back at Doc’s ready to get Jerry, the Marshal was there in the outer room talking with Doc.

“Heard anything about the cattle drive – if they’ve made the railhead yet?” Johnny asked.

“They’ll be there by noon today. Expect a dozen whisky thirsty cow pokes here by sundown.”

“The trail boss is named Black – Mr. Black is all I know. If you run into him be sure he hears about Jerry. Jerry’s worried he may miss out on a job the man offered him back at the ranch. We don’t need Jerry trying to pick up stakes and follow him back to Texas barefoot. Oh, that makes me think; he needs all new clothes and boots. What he arrived in were cut into rags when Doc worked on him.”

Jerry entered from the bed room. He was wearing a new tan shirt and dark pants and boots fit for a cowpoke.

“Look what the Marshal brought me,” he said looking himself over. “Never had such fancy duds. I’ll never be able to pay you for them, sir.”

“You just take good care of young Johnny here and his aunt for the next few weeks and we’ll consider it even,” Cal said.

“I understand that’s nothin’ but sun dried cow dung, Sir. But, thank you, I guess. I’m not used to being in this position – of getting to thank somebody for doing somethin’ nice for me.”

Cilla entered carrying the boy’s hat – freshly cleaned, re-dyed brown and blocked. She sailed it across the five feet to him. He caught it with his left hand impressed at how she had handled it. He looked it over, at first thinking it was new.

“Oh. This is mine. Like it found new life. Thank you. It was my father’s. I’m glad it didn’t get lost. It’s about all I have from him.”

As much as he wanted to help, Johnny let his new friend navigate the steps by himself. It had become clear that Jerry was a proud young man and offering assistance would have offended him. Also, Johnny knew he needed to begin doing as much for himself as he could.

Johnny had intentionally left the buggy a block away so they could walk the sidewalk together. He was proud to be Jericho’s friend, and wanted the townspeople to see that. They took their time. Johnny pointed out a number of things as they walked – the Marshal’s office across the street, the restaurant, the saloon and the general store. He took time to make introductions as they came upon people.

They were soon at the buggy. Aunt Bea was standing down on the street beside the hitching rail.

“Why, Johnny, you didn’t tell me our new house guest was so handsome.”

Jerry figured it was more cow dung, but allowed it. He smiled and nodded slightly, the way Johnny did whenever Cilla arrived.

“Since I have Diab to ride home, I figured Jerry could handle the reins for you, Aunt Bea.”

She understood that Johnny figured Jerry would feel put down to just sit there beside a woman, letting her handle

the horse. Such beliefs continued to bother her, but in order to make the young man feel good about himself she allowed it without question. The horse knew the way and all he would really have to do was to hold the reins.

“I’ll catch up. Diab’s at the livery stable.”

Johnny left on the trot and in a few minutes was heading out after the others. He purposefully lagged behind. Diablo clearly disapproved of the slow pace and pranced and tugged at the reins to indicate his displeasure. Johnny understood that if Aunt Bea had just fifteen minutes alone with the boy, she’d not only have him feeling comfortable with her, but she’d put a smile on his face.

That was exactly the situation as Johnny and Diablo pulled up beside them.

“Your Aunt wants me to show her how I fix biscuits and hard tack (a hard cracker cowboys kept for snacks) like I do on the trail. I make the best – even Cookie says so.”

Johnny just listened as the two of them talked. He was amazed. Who was this chatty stranger sitting beside his aunt? She was something else.

They pulled up in front of the house. Johnny helped his aunt down and tied up the horse at the hitching post. He kept a clandestine (secret) watch on Jerry to make sure he could manage to climb down, himself. He even seemed to accomplish it with relatively little pain.

There were two packages – the bacon weighed five pounds, the flour twenty-five. Johnny picked up the bacon and put it into Jerry’s left arm, then picked up the flour and they followed his aunt into the house. Jerry seemed to understand that Johnny was going to allow him to do what he could. That pleased him.

Bea preferred to put things away in her kitchen by herself, so once the packages were on the table, Johnny led Jerry into his room.

“It’s just the right size for a guy my age. I figure it will be just the right size for the two of us for however long we need it that way.”

“I’d still rather . . .” Jerry began.

Johnny interrupted him.

“Hush your prattle, as you’ll learn my aunt says when

she doesn't like what she's hearing."

"The bed is yours. The bed roll there will be mine."

"Since you're making me sleep inside a house, at least let me take the bedroll," Jerry came back."

"A counter proposal," Johnny said.

Jerry looked puzzled, clearly not understanding the term.

"A counterproposal is like another way of looking at something – another possibility or suggestion."

Jerry nodded and offered a smile. Johnny continued.

"You will sleep in the bed for the first two nights and then we'll flip a coin every night after that to see who sleeps where."

It was worth a big smile from Jerry. He nodded, clearly not really liking the 'counter proposal' but willing to accept it. His wishes had seldom ever been taken into account by anyone, so that solution felt very good to him. It was almost as if the people he'd met in Red Rock thought he was a real person. That was a truly odd and unfamiliar situation.

"We need to take care of the horses," Johnny said.

"That's my specialty," Jerry said. "It's what I'm really good at. They all say I am. Mr. Black even calls me his Number One Wrangler. My father was the best. He taught me everything he knew about it before . . ."

The sentence just lay there unfinished. Johnny would not let it become an awkward moment. He immediately moved on.

"I'm looking forward to learning a lot from you, then – if you're willing to share it with me."

"Of course. It will be great. I had a horse with the drive – a pinto I called 'Pinto'."

They chuckled.

"He isn't really mine, but Mr. Black let me use her – what's the word, exclumally?"

"Probably, exclusively."

"Yes, that was it. Exclusively. I've noticed you know a lot of words and you can read."

"I'll have to plead guilty to both."

Jerry frowned.

"I was trying to make a joke. You'll find my sense of

humor is often quite esoteric – that means often not understood by anybody but me.”

“I really don’t understand about jokes and things like that.”

“I guarantee that won’t last long. All my friends and I like to joke around. You’ll soon be a part of it all.”

“Your friends like Doc and Cilla and the Marshal?”

“For starters. I have some kid friends, too. Even a sort of girlfriend named Clair. Her hands are soft and she always smells wonderful.”

“I don’t understand ‘sort of girlfriend’.”

“Well, to tell you the truth, neither do I. This boy and girl stuff is still pretty mysterious to me I’m afraid. Just when I think I’m getting it figured out – bam! – something happens to show me I’m just as ignorant about it all as I was the day before.”

“I haven’t been around many girls – mostly just men whose hands are as tough as stirrup leather and who smell a lot like the horses they ride.”

Johnny laughed out loud.

“That was a great line, Jerry. See, you can make jokes.”

“I really wasn’t trying to be funny. I was just saying the truth.”

“Sometimes the truth is the funniest thing of all. Let’s get these horses tended to. By the time we’re finished, Aunt Bea will have lunch ready. I’m starved. How about you?”

“Starved?”

“Hungry.”

“Starved seems like a very strange way to say you are just hungry.”

“I suppose you’re right about that. I can see we have a lot of things to learn from each other. By the way, your first reading lesson will be this evening – if you behave.”

Jerry’s furrowed forehead suddenly smoothed.

“That was a joke, right?”

“Well, I thought so, at least. Glad it seemed like that to you, too. We may have a comfortable future together after all.”

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CHAPTER SIX

The boys finished with the horses and as they rounded the front of the house Johnny saw Cal's horse, Gray, hitched there beside a smaller horse he didn't recognize.

"Pinto!" Jerry called out and immediately moved toward him still unable to really hurry.

Johnny mounted the porch and opened the door, calling inside.

"Marshal. You got something to tell us?"

Cal was soon on the porch.

"Jericho, your Mr. Black brought your horse up to Red Bend for you. He says whenever you're ready for that job, to come back to the ranch. It will be waiting. He has to start back in the morning. He forced some money on Doc to help pay for your care. Doc protested, but Mr. Black can be very persuasive. They agreed that if Doc would take it, he could use it to help you with your financial needs until you get yourself back to normal."

"Mr. Black did that? For me?"

Cal could see the problem it seemed to be presenting for the boy.

"Just think of it as your pay for the drive – like the other hands got when they arrived at the railhead."

It produced a smile, but clearly left many questions. He turned his attention back to his horse.

Pinto seemed as happy to see Jerry as the boy was to see him.

"This ain't my saddle, Marshal. It's the one I used, but not mine. Some way you can get it back to Mr. Black for me

before he leaves out in the morning’?”

“He said it was yours to keep. Something about you broke it in so it wouldn’t really fit anybody’s hind quarters but yours.”

“That’s more cow dung, sir. I can’t understand it. He seldom gave me the time of day – he never mistreated me, but never seemed like he really cared either.”

“Sometimes we humans don’t realize how much something means to us until it looks like we might lose it. I expect that’s the case.”

Jerry gave no response in words or gestures. It was clearly a mystery to him.

The Marshal went on.

“Bea invited me to stay for lunch, which I won’t be getting’ any of if we just stand out here talkin’. Inside the both of you. You can look after the horse later. They’ve both had a good drink and the sun’ll do them good on a chilly day like this.”

At the table, Jerry picked up the knife and fork and handed them back to Bea.

“Never used anything ‘cept a spoon. Wouldn’t want to get them dirty, you know.”

Bea accepted them without comment. Jerry certainly knew his way around a spoon. He used the back to butter his biscuits, the sharp edge to cut his ham, and the . . . well, the scoop, to handle the potato salad and soup. Why would anybody really need anything more!

The Marshal left right after lunch. Johnny convinced Jerry he should rest while he and Aunt Bea did up the dishes. Then, Johnny sat back down at the kitchen table and studied a copy of a map he had hand copied from one at Cilla’s office. It was the section of Kansas that went north and east as far as the location of Max’s old Pony Express station – plus a little further on up into Nebraska – and as far south west as Red Bend. He had included as much detail as seemed important – hills, gullies, streams, ponds, woods, settlements and the houses of ranchers and farmers. He added what additional things he could remember from the ride as far up as Max’s house. That was no more than a quarter of the way to the station – in all a five or six-hour ride from Red Bend with the

hills and creeks to deal with.

He needed to ride that trail all the way to the station and try to figure out what happened to Matt. Just how he would figure that out, he had no idea, but things like that never concerned Johnny. It was his experience that if he could start something he could almost always find a way to finish it. That included the apple pie Aunt Bea would soon be removing from the oven.

Jerry slept for an hour. Johnny was still at the table reading when his new friend returned to the front room sniffing the air.

“Something smells good.”

“Aunt Bea’s apple pie. Nobody makes a better apple pie than she does. It’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

Aunt Bea opened the oven door and, looking it over, pronounced it done. She removed it to the cutting board beside the sink to cool for a few minutes before slicing it. The top crust tended to crumble when it was cut before cooling a bit.

Jerry walked over and looked at the pie.

“First pie I ever seen. Had a apple fritter once when I was a little kid. It was awful sweet, I thought.”

Johnny addressed his aunt.

“He may be more of a rhubarb pie man if he’s not into sweets. I’ll cut some later on. It’s old and sort of tough this late but I’m betting you can work some magic on it. Should be enough for a small pie.”

“It sounds like you have pie often?”

It came out like a question.

“Yup. Pies, cakes, cobblers, strudel, cinnamon rolls, cookies – you name it. If it comes out of an oven, Aunt Bea can fix it better than anybody else.”

“Do you have some favorite foods?” Bea asked.

“Favorite? Never thought about favorite. Mostly just happy to have food.”

“Well, you keep tabs on what we have around here and see what you like best. Then tell me so we can have it often.”

“I like beans and bacon and biscuits, I guess, and hard tack.”

“I’ll see to it that we have at least one of those at every

meal, then.”

Jerry became serious.

“I have the idea I am really asleep and all of this is a dream, except I doubt if you can dream about things you don’t know about and I never knowed about nice folks before – or apple pie.”

“Guess you must be awake then. Or, maybe you’re really in my dream and you were never attacked by that coyote and I never really ever met you – oh no, like you said, I couldn’t be dreaming about things I have never known about.”

“I think what you just said was that esoteric thing you told me about.”

“And I’d say you were 100% correct. Good memory, by the way.”

“My father said I had a very good memory. He said I learned new things fast. I like to learn new things. Maybe I can learn how to make a apple pie.”

“I’ll just bet you can,” Bea said, “or a rhubarb pie, perhaps.”

Jerry noticed the map on the table and went to look over Johnny’s shoulder.

“A map. Where’s it about?”

Johnny thought to himself that he had never heard the phrase ‘where’s it about’ before, but it made perfect sense – a map is a where and not a what. He tried to answer Jerry’s question.

“It’s the section of Kansas between here and north to the Pony Express route.”

“I’ve heard about the Pony Express – mail fellas on fast horses.”

“That’s it. See this trail I’ve marked. I think a Pony Express rider was taking that south west toward Red Bend when he disappeared.”

“You still have the Pony Express up here in Kansas?”

“No. No. He vanished almost 20 years ago. I just learned about it and I’m sort of drawn toward mysteries – I like to solve them. I’m trying to solve this one and I’m writing a story about it – adding things as I uncover new information.”

“You are so lucky you can read and write and know so many words. Did you mean it when you said you could help

me learn to read?”

“I sure did. I suppose there’s no time like the present to start, is there?”

“After or before the apple pie?” Jerry asked.

Johnny and Bea broke into laughter. Jerry chuckled a few times listening and watching them over his growing smile. He had no idea what had been funny, but like it’s been said, laughter is contagious.

Johnny explained as best he could while Aunt Bea served the pie. For a boy who seemed leery of sweet things, he didn’t leave a single crumb on his plate.

* * *

During the next ten days Jerry grew strong again and had added a number of new foods to his list of what was acceptable, if not enjoyable – chicken pot pie, ham and yam casserole, hot potato salad, and fried chicken covered in a crispy coating. He thought it odd to drink cold milk. The only kind he had ever drunk was warm – straight out of the cow. Although biscuits continued to be his preference he managed to put away his share of Bea’s fresh baked white bread – they referred to it as ‘light bread’ to distinguish it from biscuits.

Jerry and Bea enjoyed coffee at the end of each meal. He had been drinking it since he was very young. It is what cowpokes drank. The first time he really laughed full out was while watching Johnny take his very first big mouthful of coffee – trying to be one of the gang there at the kitchen table. He filled his mouth as if taking a big swig of milk. Poor Johnny! It tasted absolutely dreadful. He had never before had anything so totally disgusting in his mouth. It wouldn’t go down and yet he wasn’t about to spit it out and admit his problem with it. He tried to smile. His cheeks grew red, his eyes bugged out, he made terrible faces and eventually had to leave the table and exit the room to get rid of it outside.

Jerry and Bea both laughed on for some time – Jerry just at Johnny, but Bea at Jerry’s wonderful reaction as well. In the end, Johnny could laugh about it, also, and considered it a good lesson learned: He figured all coffee drinkers had a death wish.

Jerry had visited Doc on two occasions and was pronounced well on the road to recovery. With Johnny’s

supervision, he had quite faithfully done his exercises morning and night. They were no longer so painful – for either of them! It was the sixth day since moving in with Bea and Johnny and the day the stitches were to be removed. The boys rode to town on Diablo and Pinto for the first time.

“I won’t tell you it isn’t going to hurt,” Doc said as Jerry stretched himself out on his back on the examination table. He rolled up his own shirtsleeve.

“That’s one of the things I like about you, Doc.”

“That I’m always seeming to hurt you?”

“No. That you have always been honest with me about things – like that the exercises would hurt and that in time I would come to be comfortable out at Bea and Johnny’s place. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome, I’m sure. You been keeping them in line like I asked?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. I can report they’ve behaved real good.”

Knowing how it hurt to have deep stitches removed, Johnny had planned a distraction for his friend.

“Hey, Jerry, let’s show Doc your new trick while he snips those stitches away.”

Both Doc and Jerry turned toward Johnny, not understanding.

“Trick?” they both asked at the same time.

Johnny picked up a copy of the newspaper from the table by the door and folded it in half. He placed it in Jerry hands and pointed to a spot on the page. Jerry smiled when he understood what was going on. He began.

“Harry and Sarah Miller are having an – ouch! - open house to celebrate their – ouch! – tenth wedding anniversary on – ouch! Everybody is invited to drop by between – ouch – and – ouch! – that’s one and three on the 21st.”

Doc had not been aware that Jerry couldn’t read so looked at Johnny with a puzzled expression.

“My very first reading student, Doc. Six days and he’s already reading Cilla’s paper like an old pro.”

“Exceptional, I’d say. I am impressed.”

He leaned close to Jerry and continued.

“You must be an excellent student, son, because I’m not all that impressed with your teacher.”

They all understood it had been a joke, but still, it made both boys feel good.

It was an important event in Jerry's life and he had more to say about it.

"Aunt Bea – well, Bea – helped some, too. She wrote words on little slips of paper – names of things – and left them around the house – chair, table, floor, door, and one I had some difficulty with at first – 'take out the garbage'."

It was worth another chuckle between the boys.

Doc had other things on his mind.

"How did it feel to be back riding your horse this morning – and you need to be honest with me like I've been with you?"

Jerry smiled understanding that honesty had to go both ways.

"Very good. Really. Truthfully, my arm and leg didn't get as tired as my butt. It's been a while since I've been in a saddle."

"I think Doc has some special ointment for tired butts, don't you, Doc?"

"I'll pass on that I think," Jerry said sliding down off the table before the suggestion could be acted upon.

"You have healed very well. Give that skin a few more days before you get back into bath water."

"Bath water?" Jerry asked looking back and forth between the other two.

"We civilized folks take a bath once a week," Johnny said.

Jerry looked puzzled then nodded.

"It's one of Johnny's jokes," Jerry explained to Doc. "Dad just used to sit me down in the horse's water trough a couple times a month. Said it did double duty; got me clean and washed my clothes all at the same time."

They enjoyed the little joke. It reminded Johnny of something.

"Jerry needs a second set of duds so we can wash what he's been wearing. No offense, pal, but this morning I couldn't tell the difference between you and Pinto when I closed my eyes."

"Mr. Black left some money for you, Jericho," Doc said.

“I told him I’d look after it until you were ready for it. You ready now?”

“Oh, no Sir. I don’t know nothin’ about takin’ care of money. You keep it if you will, please. I’m uncomfortable about it in the first place.”

“I’ll be glad to take care of it. The way I hear it you earned it, but Johnny has a good point. Let me get you a couple of dollars and you can go the General Store and pick out a new shirt and pants. You’ll need a good winter coat, too. I imagine the clerk will throw in some stockings (sox) free of charge. I notice you’re not wearing the ones the Marshal got for you.”

“Gloves don’t belong on feet no matter what you call them.”

Doc and Jerry chuckled and nodded.

“That’s your call,” Doc said, but toes do get cold in these northern winters.”

Every time Doc spoke with the lad he became more and more impressed at how intelligent he was. It posed several problems. He had the possibility for a whole lot more in his future than wrangling horses on cattle drives, but how to set him on some other path was difficult to figure. He’d keep thinking on it and he was sure Johnny was already well ahead of him on that score.

“So, you’re saying Jerry is well enough for a trail ride, are you?” Johnny said in a straight-out, matter of fact manner.

“I didn’t hear me saying that.”

He turned to Jerry.

“Did you hear me saying that?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Loud and clear. Trail ride fit. That’s what I heard alright.”

“I declare! One of you lies and the other one swears to it. I do believe you deserve each other. Just promise you’ll use good judgment – that’s good grown-up judgment not the, ‘it oughta, sorta, probably, should be alright, maybe, kind of judgment’, that’s typically invoked by boys your age.”

Johnny raised his right hand.

“I swear, as a someday to probably be a grown-up.”

Although it really made no sense, they all seemed to understand.

“You two get out of here. Go! Scoot! Bother Cilla or the Marshal for a while.”

He handed over the two silver dollars to Jerry and made the shooing motion with his hands as he herded them toward the door. Johnny understood it was Doc’s way of playing with them. Jerry figured that was so, but would clear it up with Johnny later.

He was learning that it was wonderful when somebody set out to make you smile.

They made the purchases and took them along in their saddlebags. On the way home, they stopped at Johnny’s favorite spot along the creek. He took the occasion to introduce Jerry to a bar of soap, a washcloth, and the process of cleaning up without the benefit of a horse trough. Jerry changed into his new clothes and Aunt Bea, all quite dramatically, did a double take as he walked into the house.

Keeping clean was a fully foreign concept to Jerry, but he was willing to give into it since it seemed so important to his new friends. The process of washing clothes, however, seemed like inflicting cruel and unusual punishment on the garments. Surely, they would last a lot longer if they weren’t regularly manhandled in that way. But, again . . .

* * *

It was the first week in December. Central Kansas had lucked out in the weather department – no significant snowfall to that point, and the sky looked clear for at least another week. Johnny worked his magic and received permission for him and Jerry to ride the trail toward the old Pony Express station. They would stop and see Max on the way and try to jog his old head about things he might have remembered about Matt or the ride or some related matter.

With saddlebags filled with bacon, flour, and other essentials for survival on a trail ride, they set out at dawn. It would put them at Max’s by seven o’clock. Johnny was not sure where Max stood on the matter of half-breeds like Jerry (Today we refer to such a person as mixed race and most folks don’t think twice about it. Things were much different back in 1880 Kansas.). Johnny brought it up to his new friend.

“Not sure how Max stands on folks like you,” Johnny said knowing he had said it poorly.

“Handsome, intelligent, young men, you mean?”

“Yes. Exactly what I meant. It really stinks to even have to bring it up.”

“Prejudice ain’t your invention,” Jerry said.

He was clearly more adjusted to it than Johnny was. He didn’t like it. He didn’t think it was right, but he knew how it was and didn’t fight it.

“So, you got no folks either?” Jerry said as the trail widened and they could ride side by side.

“That’s right. Died in a house fire earlier this year. Now it’s just Aunt Bea, Diablo and me.”

“And all your friends,” Jerry hurried to add.

Friends, Johnny was coming to see, represented a wonderful new universe to Jerry.

“Yes. And all my good friends. Doesn’t mean I don’t miss my folks, you understand. I miss them every day, but this is my life now so I do my best to live it well.”

Jerry nodded and was ready to share a few things more about himself.

“My mother died getting me into the world so I never knew her. My father seemed to love her very much. She was the daughter of a rancher in Texas. I lived with my father until I was eleven – four years ago, almost. He got killed in a stampede. We had been workin’ for Mr. Black for about six months. I just stayed on. Nobody really ever said I could. I just never left – had nowhere to go. Slept where I could. Ate what scraps I could find.

One day Mr. Black come and handed me a new rope (lasso) and said I was the new wrangler for the spare horses. That’s what dad and I had been doing here and there since I was just a little kid. Dad was the best.”

“What about your grandfather – your mother’s father.”

“He don’t recognize my existence. Calls me filth. He’s not a possibility for me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“Again, that ain’t your doin’. Here I am. Almost fifteen, suddenly with a horse and saddle, two outfits and a little money back at Doc’s.”

“And a pair of stockings – don’t forget that,” Johnny said trying to lighten the mood.”

Jerry managed a smile.

“What I meant was, I could be doing worse – a lot worse. I been thinkin’ I may suddenly have a chance for better things, you know. Don’t know what, but seems to me I may owe that hungry ol’ coyote a thank you for forcing all this on me.”

Johnny could see they were a whole lot alike – a whole lot more alike than they were different: orphans, big time thinkers, smart, survivors, and they both found ways to see the good side of life no matter what it threw at them. Maybe, they even needed each other at the time in their lives. Time would tell, he supposed. Johnny gently urged Diablo to a trot and Jerry followed his lead.

Johnny pointed directly ahead over the tree tops.

“There’s Max’s place somewhere under that wisp of chimney smoke.”

“The air is getting heavy,” Jerry said. “See how the smoke spreads out and hangs close to the earth. Could be a signal for a big change in the weather.”

“I think we make a good team,” Johnny said.

“How’s that?”

“I know a lot of stuff from books and you know a lot of real stuff – stuff from living out in the world. That covers just about everything there is in the whole universe, I’d say.”

They exchanged lingering smiles.

Jerry suddenly felt a type of equality he had never felt with anybody before. It was one of the most important moments in his life and he recognized that.

“Thank you, Johnny, and don’t ask me why. Someday we’ll talk it out.”

Johnny just nodded, not at all sure what had just taken place. True friends went with their friend’s wishes on such matters and only a true friend really had the right to ask such a thing.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

They slowed as they approached Max's place. His shaggy old black and white dog loped out to meet them – well, probably to meet Diablo, but at any rate, he moved toward them as fast as an aging dog could. Max stood and removed his hat. That was not usual. He stared at Jerry. Johnny was unsure what was about to happen, but he moved forward as if things would be fine. He began speaking before they stopped.

“Hey, Max. Want you to meet my new friend Jericho – he lets me call him Jerry.”

Max moved off the porch and met them as they pulled up at the hitching rail, his hand out for a shake clearly aimed at Jerry.

“I’ll be darned, son, if you ain’t the spittin’ image of my son at your age. Lost him in the war [Civil War]. Let’s get the fire going and stir us up a feast.”

So much for the fear about Max not reacting well to Jerry’s heritage. It was the first-time Johnny had heard the old man speak about his family. It had always seemed like an off-limits topic. At that moment, he thought he understood. His wife had been Indian. He was glad to get that out in the open.

Jerry looked at Johnny. Johnny offered a shrug. They both dismounted. Dog stayed with Diablo and Pinto – one mystery solved.

“We’re riding the trail up to the old Express Station,” Johnny explained. “Thought we’d give the horses a rest here for a time.”

“You mean you thought you’d stop and pick the old man’s brain for a while, hoping something new had bubbled

up in there.”

“That, too. It can be both, can’t it?”

Max turned to Jerry.

“He always has an answer for everything – you noticed that. Always!”

Jerry nodded feeling special to have been singled out that way for a private word between them.

“And his answer often contains big words I’ve never heard of,” Jerry added going along with the foolishness in the only way he could figure at the moment.

Max nodded and they shared a chuckle. The old man placed his hand on Jerry’s shoulder and urged him up onto the porch. Johnny was pleased with how things were going.

“We just had breakfast, Max,” Johnny said. “Maybe we can put that feast off until we’re on our way back. He opened a saddle bag and rummaged through its contents. Aunt Bea sent some things for you – let’s see – a bag of apples, a couple cinnamon rolls, some ham and yam casserole, and a piece of apple pie.”

“I helped her bake the pie,” Jerry explained with some enthusiasm.

“So, if it isn’t as good as usual you’ll know why,” Johnny added, kidding of course.

While Max enjoyed the pie, Johnny asked him to tell the story of the rider one more time. There was nothing new. Johnny took out the map he had prepared and showed it to his old friend.

“This look about right to you?”

Max studied it with some care for a few moments, then nodded.

“Very good. There used to be a wagon trail right here – crossed the creek here – it was a wide, shallow, ford back then. One summer a flood up in Nebraska sent so much water downstream that it dredged out that ford and it became way too deep to cross. The trail stopped bein’ used. Moved a mile or so north of here. Still in use up there to this day.”

Johnny took out a pencil and drew in the trail where Max had indicated. It was a good third of the way back down the trail toward Red Bend from Max’s place.

“There are stand-up rocks there and a woods,” Jerry

said. "I wondered about the low, flat, ditch off to the east. Must have been the old trail – wide like for wagons."

"Good eye," Max said. "That's exactly the spot."

"But the rider would have been riding south on the trail that we just rode north, right?" Johnny asked to make sure he understood.

"That's right. Speakin' of ridin' the trail – that does remind me of something I probably never shared with you, Johnny. The Pony Express horses all wore the same style of shoes – all had the same design on them. That wasn't generally knowed. Kept a secret so stolen mounts could be identified right off."

"That's good information. Thanks. Can you draw the design for us here on the back of the map?"

"I'll try. The old hands ain't as steady as they used to be."

Several minutes later he had rendered a good likeness of a horse shoe with the distinctive markings on it.

"Looks like a series of letters," Johnny said. "COCPPEC."

"That's right. The company that ran the Pony express was actually named the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company. Them letters was the initials of the company.

"I've never heard about the shoes," Johnny said, "and I've read just about everything that's been written about the Pony Express."

"It was just us Station Masters what knowed about the shoes and we was swore to secrecy – if it got out it wouldn't do no good, you understand. Shoes could be switched in the blink of a eye."

"I hope it's alright for you to have told us now."

"None of those grand horses is still walkin' the face of this earth, son. Can't be no problem, now."

Armed with two new pieces of information, the boys mounted their horse and headed on up the trail. Johnny almost never met anybody on it. There was a good road that followed the creek to the east. Wagons and buggies used it. The trail often narrowed so only one horse could pass along it at a time.

"It's strange to see so many trees without leaves on them," Jerry said.

"They were really pretty in the fall – reds, orange, gold all sprinkled in among the pines," Johnny said.

"I'd like to see that. It sound beautiful. Trees that turn colors. I'm thinking there are lots of things in the world that aren't like they are in Texas."

Johnny didn't respond, but was privately happy his friend's ideas about the world were expanding. He could hardly wait to point him to the school library. He'd probably take a bedroll and live there.

As they rode, Jerry talked about Texas and ranching and of his love for horses. Johnny talked some about his life back in Kansas City, but mostly about the things he was learning there in Red Bend. Time passed quickly and by noon they had the old building in sight.

It was a one story, stone structure with a wide porch across the front and a chimney rising above the roof on the east side. The porch roof had collapsed on one end. The stable out back had long fallen in on itself and was good for nothing more than kindling. The front door of the main building was ajar (partly open). After circling the area on their horses, they tied up at the rail across the front of the porch and moved to the windows – long broken – and peeked inside. Johnny moved to the door and pushed it on open. Jerry followed a bit more reluctantly.

Inside were three rooms. In addition to inch high dust everywhere, were the sorts of things they expected. The back room contained a half dozen cots. The front room held a desk, two benches, two gun racks near the front door, a wood burning stove for heat and cooking and a pump at a cabinet with a sink. There were other cabinets here and there – some open and some with doors. The room to the west had been the tack room (where the saddles and such had been kept). The building had been stripped of most everything of any value – whether that had been done by the company when it went out of business or by looters was not apparent.

"I don't see anything here of any value to us," Johnny said and turned to leave.

Above the door was a horseshoe. Johnny had often

seen them in that position. He pointed to it.

“Any idea why a horseshoe is tacked up over a door?” he asked Jerry.

“It brings happiness to the people who enter through the door. Well, it’s supposed to. That one won’t, though.”

“Won’t. Why not.”

Jerry had his attention. Johnny was fascinated by superstitions.

“The open end of the horseshoe is supposed to be facing up – to hold in the happiness. That one is facing down – the happiness has all drained away.”

They moved closer to examine it. They found that the two nails that had held it upright had rusted away and had allowed it to swing down. The single nail holding it in place was within weeks of giving way also. Johnny reached up to touch it. It came off the wall into his hand.

“Oops! Hope that’s not more bad luck or anything.”

Jerry gave an unexpected reply.

“I doubt if a curved strip of metal can bring either happiness or unhappiness – and certainly not bad luck.”

It seemed they were on the same page regarding superstitions.

“Think it would be wrong to take it with us?” Johnny asked.

“You askin’ me?”

Johnny looked around.

“No. I was asking that ground squirrel over there.”

Jerry smiled, understanding the joke.

“I’m not used to being asked for my opinion on things. I can’t see how it is doing anybody any good up there. You got an idea about using it?”

“Just wondered if it was a regulation Pony Express horseshoe. Had the wrong side exposed up there to tell. Now I can see.”

He handed it to Jerry.

“I see. It looks like the drawing Max made. How interesting. Maybe Mr. Max would like it.”

“That’s a nice thought. We’ll take it along.”

They mounted up and started back south along the trail.

“The horses need a drink,” Jerry said. “We should head over to the creek first.”

Without hesitation, Johnny guided Diablo in that direction. Jerry offered another piece of information.

“On a cool day like this, they will want to drink more than they need – out of habit. That’s not good for them.”

Johnny nodded and waited for Jerry to indicate when enough was enough.

With the horses watered they were soon back on the trail. Johnny spoke.

“This is the main reason for this trip,” Johnny said. “We are retracing the route Max thinks Matt took on his final ride south. I know it’s a long shot, but I’m hoping something will stand out that will provide a clue about what could have happened to him. I need to count on your savvy about outdoors things and I have no idea what I meant by that.”

“Jerry smiled. I’ll do my best. How do we do this?”

“Why don’t you just talk about what you see and what it means or why it’s there and things like that?”

“I can do that. To start with, look down along both sides of the trail here. See where it used to be over there?”

“No. How can you tell that?”

“See the strip of darker green grass? That’s where it was originally. For some reason the riders stopped using it and started riding up here – ten feet west. The new grass is a different kind. Probably seed blown in from somewhere else taking root in that bare dirt – a different kind of grass.”

“Why would riders do that?”

Jerry pointed just ahead to the east.

“The last rotted pieces of a tree – see the old stump over there? The tree fell, blocking the trail. I’d say the tree’s been rotting maybe ten years. Mostly gone. The ants have even given up on it.”

“Amazing! I’d have never put all that together. Keep talking.”

He did. Johnny listened and made mental notes of everything his friend had to say.

They stopped for just a few minutes at Max’s, giving him the horseshoe and taking a rain check on the promised feast. It had already been a ten-hour day on the trail and the

sky was darkening and a cold wind had begun blowing in from the north. Just as Jerry had predicted earlier, the weather was about to change. Max understood they needed to get on down the trail toward home. They untied their winter coats from where they had been stowed behind the saddles and slipped into them.

Not long after they had left Max's place, the snow began. Snow was a new experience for Jerry and he was about to get a rip roarin' introduction. It wasn't the blinding, white-out variety, but it had soon laid down a white mantle several inches thick. Kansas snows were either light and dry and easily blown from place to place, or heavy and wet. That one was of the second variety.

Jerry thought it was wonderful. Johnny understood it could quickly develop into a serious situation, but said nothing to interfere with his friend's new experience. With the heavy snow accumulating on the trail it was risky to push the horses beyond a walk.

"I think we should look for shelter where we can wait this out," Johnny said.

"There is a cave over there somewhere in the tall rocks," Jerry offered.

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Early this morning on our way north I noticed bats coming down from the sky. They fly and feed on insects at night and return home to sleep by day. There's a cave in there somewhere. I'd bet on it."

"You take the lead," Johnny said, pulling up so Jerry could move out in front.

They wove their way through some rough terrain and presently came upon the entrance to a shallow cave – no more than five feet high and three wide. Jerry dismounted. Johnny followed his lead still amazed.

They moved inside. It was small – no more than fifteen feet front to back, but immediately became some twenty feet high just inside the opening.

"This will be excellent," Jerry said. "The bats will stay up there clinging to the ceiling and we should all get along just fine sharing the space."

They brought the horses inside. Pinto took some

encouraging, still skittish about the snow and not used to being in enclosures with roofs overhead. Diablo nuzzled him as if to reassure him it would be alright.

“First, we need to gather what wood we can find before it gets covered with snow,” Jerry suggested.

They spent the next ten minutes undertaking that project and found a considerable amount – most of it still relatively dry.

Jerry laid a small fire near the entrance.

“I’m thinking there is good reason for where you’re placing the fire,” Johnny said really asking a question.

“Keeps wild animals from entering, allows the smoke to escape outside so we won’t be choked by it and directs the heat up the front wall above the opening so it circulates throughout the room.”

“Like I said, I was sure there was good reason for it.”

“A very small fire will keep us nice and warm. The next thing is to see if we can dig a small hole in the floor, then fill it with snow so the horses will have water when it melts.”

“I thought you’d never been in snow before.”

“I haven’t, but I’ve always been pretty good at figuring things out.”

“I’d say so.”

Using sharp-edged rocks, they soon had a shallow area scooped out and filled with snow. Jerry was amazed at how, when snow melted, it made very little water.

“Eight or ten inches of snow for one inch of water,” Johnny said offering the standard explanation.

After all their work neither horse seemed thirsty. The water would be there when they needed it. They searched the saddle bags for Aunt Bea’s goodies and had soon eased their growing hunger.

With those essentials out of the way, they had time to make a number of observations. The snowfall was increasing outside. Aunt Bea would be worried. The temperature in the cave actually became fairly cozy – just like Jerry had promised. They opened their coats.

Johnny walked to the rear of the room.

“Hey. Come look at this,” he said pointing to a long narrow pile of rocks. It was less than a foot high and several

wide that stretched out along the back wall.

“What do you suppose it is?” Johnny asked. “Doesn’t look like a natural formation, does it?”

“I have a guess,” Jerry said.

“What?”

“A shallow grave. It’s been there for many years. See how the rocks have all settled in tight against each other and they’re coved in dust and bat dung. I’d say at least a dozen years – probably more.”

“It could be something else, I suppose,” Johnny said.

“Like what?”

“Like guns or ammunition buried back during the war, or kegs of black powder or loot from a stage or bank robbery.”

“Your head does go off in strange ways. Your aunt warned me about that.”

They smiled.

“So, should we take a look?” Johnny asked.

“Not if it’s a grave,” Jerry said with some emotion.

“But how can we know it it’s a grave if we don’t investigate?”

“Like Max said, you have an answer for everything.”

“I try.”

“You’re going to look, aren’t you?”

“Seems like our sacred duty to make sure there’s no problem in there.”

Jerry moved back several steps clearly uncomfortable with the undertaking. Johnny knelt down and began removing the rocks one at a time and placing them aside. Jerry moved back to the fire and took a seat on the ground keeping an eye on the activity from a distance. Fifteen minutes passed.

“Got something,” Johnny said at last. “Leather. Not a saddle or boots or a coat. I’m pretty sure it’s a mochila – in which the mail was carried by Pony Express riders.”

He worked faster and soon had it pulled from beneath the rocks. That, however, uncovered a brand-new problem.

“Oh, oh. Looks like we were both right, Jerry – a cache of stuff and a grave.”

“Jerry stood and walked to a spot just behind Johnny.

“It’s not good to disturb a grave.”

“Look at it this way. We aren’t disturbing a grave; we

may just be solving the twenty-year-old mystery of how Matt Roth died. He deserves that much, don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

He shivered.

Johnny got back to work removing one rock at a time.

"Got a skull here," he said.

He dug further.

"Got shoulders and a sternum (breast bone to which ribs are connected). Look at this. Could be what's left of feathers. See!"

Jerry, who had been watching, but not participating, nodded.

"Some Indian tribes made a bouquet of colorful feathers and laid it on the chest of fallen warriors before burying them – like wings to help them fly into the afterlife."

"So, you think this is an Indian."

"I don't know how to be sure, but why would an Indian be buried with what you called a mochila? Were there Indian Pony Express riders?"

"Not that I know of."

Johnny kept working. Gradually, Jerry began to help. They had soon uncovered the entire skeleton – the first either of them had ever seen. It sent a chill up both of their backs.

"Looks to be about five feet five, wouldn't you say?"

Jerry nodded and again shivered, suggesting how uncomfortable he remained about it all.

Johnny continued clearing away rocks from beside the skeleton.

"He was wearing a ring – see," Johnny said pointing. "It's a wide silver band and has a large setting so I assume this was a man."

"Look there," Jerry said removing several more stones."

"Well what do you know? A horseshoe," Johnny said.

"Not just a horseshoe. Look at the markings," Jerry said.

"I see. A Pony Express horseshoe. I'll bet my Aunt's ranch this is Matt Roth. Now I feel like shivering."

Johnny searched the area some more and presently came up with three more shoes. It made no sense. He let it pass for the moment. There were several other features that

seemed important. The man's boots were still in place. The leather gun belt was still strapped in place around his waist. It carried no pistol. A few red threads at his neck were most likely the remains from the famous red bandanas often worn by the riders.

Johnny sat back on his legs.

"Do you realize how big this is? It's like we have been able to travel back in time and solve a mystery. The thing I don't get is why the feathers if this is not an Indian?"

"The body of a white man could have been found by an Indian and buried."

"I suppose, but that doesn't explain being buried with four horseshoes, does it?"

"No. Some explanation may come to us."

Johnny nodded. Jerry then asked the important question.

"So, what next?"

"I'm not sure. Several things come to my mind. We need to let Doc look over the remains. He may be able to find things that could tell us how the boy died. We need to try and make a more certain identification. I'm thinking that ring may be the key to that. Then, if we can be sure it is Matt, we need to let his parents know and see what they want to have done with him – his remains."

Jerry nodded as if finally agreeing with Johnny about something related to the whole undertaking.

Jerry turned suddenly toward the entrance of the cave and put his finger to his lips signaling for quiet. He motioned them to their feet and urged Johnny back against the side of the cave.

Johnny heard something, too. Perhaps a coyote or a wild cat of some kind. Perhaps the snorting of a cold horse. Perhaps the ghost of Matt Roth coming to take revenge on them for tampering with his grave!

Diablo and Pinto were clearly spooked. Jerry built up the fire. Each boy picked up a large stick and they waited for whatever was about to come through the opening.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

“Boys? You in there?”

It was Max’s unmistakable high-pitched voice. He had come looking for them through the storm. Not something an old man with a stiff leg should have done.

“Max? Yes. In here,” Johnny called moving toward the opening. “Bring your horse in out of the weather.”

The old man appeared in the doorway bathed in the gold tones of the fire and silhouetted against the darkening sky and swirling snow behind him. He had to urge his reluctant horse past the fire.

“What brings you out?” Johnny asked.

“Thought you boys might need help. I can see I was worrying for nothing. He looked around. “I’ve lived in places that were a lot worse than this.”

He chuckled his special chuckle.

He dropped the reins and his horse went to join the other two, clearly preferring their company to the humans. The old man was covered with snow. Johnny brushed it from his coat. Jerry took Max’s hat and flipped the snow off onto the floor, handing it back.

“Sorry you had to worry,” Johnny said, “but thanks for coming to look for us. What’s it doing out there?”

“Let up some the last half hour. Only about six inches on the ground.”

“How did you know to look for us here?” Jerry asked as he removed the bed rolls from Diablo and Pinto and spread them near the fire for the three of them to sit on.

“I knew about this cave. It’s the only really good shelter

from such a storm between my place and Red Bend. It's almost dark out there and I saw the smoke from your fire rising against the full moon. I must say I'm a bit surprised you knew about it, Johnny."

"Oh, I didn't," Johnny said. "Jerry made some connection between bats he saw this morning and this hole in the hill and here we are."

"Nice work, son," Max said.

"When you're rested, there is something you need to see – something we came across in here," Johnny said becoming serious.

"Son, at my age you're never rested. What did you find?"

Johnny pivoted where he sat and pointed to the rear of the cave. The light from the fire cast huge flickering shadows of their images against the back wall.

"There on the ground."

"Oh, my. That what I think it is – a skeleton?"

"That's what it is for sure," Jerry said.

"We are pretty sure it is Matt Roth. Before you look at it tell me if he ever wore a ring."

"Why, yes, he did. Never took it off, in fact. Way too big for his small hand I always thought, but he said his mother had given it to him on his thirteenth birthday – had been his grandfather's he said. Silver and had a shiny black onyx stone in it."

"That pretty well clinches it then," Johnny said. "The skeleton is wearing that ring."

"Poor lad. I guess I don't need to get up and go look. Any clues to how he died?"

"Not really. Jerry's pretty sure an Indian buried him. Not sure how that helps anything. And, oh, there were several things buried with him – his mochila and four horse shoes from a Pony Express horse. Can't figure that."

"Not all that hard, really. Somebody who knew about the special shoes removed them from his mount before he made off with it. Most reasonable explanation is probably a horse thief. Anything taken out of the mochila?"

"We didn't think to look."

"Johnny got up and retrieved it. He sat back down by

the fire cross-legged and flattened it out across his lap. All four mail pouches are unbuckled.”

He passed it over to Max who slipped his hand into each pouch searching it.

“Only one of them had anything in it when he left out from the station – the deed up here, front left. Empty now.”

He ran his hand across the piece of leather, gently. It clearly represented something very special out of his past.

“This probably has over 30,000 miles on it – back and forth from Missouri to California lots of times.”

He turned it one way and the other.

“Still in perfect shape, you see. First class leather. Soft-tanned buffalo hide. Last two hundred years if a day.”

He turned directly to Johnny.

“The boy deserves a decent burial, you know.”

“Yes. We’ve discussed that. Here’s our thinking. Get Doc up here to look over the skeleton before we touch it, to see if he can determine anything about how Matt died. Then, contact his parents in Kansas City so they can say how they want things handled.”

“Sounds good. Snow will surely be over in a few hours. By morning you boys can head on back to Red Bend. I’ll stay here and keep the animals away until you can return. Suggest you bring the undertaker back with you to manage the remains.”

The boys nodded their agreement. They broke out the last of the food to share. Johnny had a question.

“Max, what do you know about any Indians that might have been in these parts when Matt died?”

“Only a few permanent residents. All rural. Stayed to themselves mostly. Never any trouble. Lived off the land.”

“So, not the horse thief type, then.”

“Goodness, no. If they buried him it was out of kindness and respect and not to hide anything they did wrong.”

The answer satisfied Johnny. They built up the fire, arranged the sleeping rolls, and were soon asleep with full stomachs and a plan in their heads.

* * *

Before leaving the next morning, they gathered what

wood they could find close by. Max said it would be plenty. The boys were on their way.

Ten minutes out from Red Bend – with the rising sun finally beginning to warm their backs – they spotted a rider on the trail ahead of them. It was heading their direction at a slow gallop.

“That’s the cavalry,” Johnny said pointing.

“I don’t understand. I only see one rider.”

“It’s an expression that just means help is on the way. That’s the Marshal coming looking for us.”

They had soon stopped and were facing each other on the trail.

“So, Marshal, you out for an early morning ride, are you?” Johnny said making light of the possible problems they could have had.

“We’ve been worried about you. Your Aunt insisted I ride up to Max’s and see if I could locate you.”

“Thanks for that, Sir,” Jerry said, “but we are fine.”

“My new friend here saved our bacon,” Johnny said.

Jerry looked puzzled – again.

“Another saying. I’ll explain later. The short version is this, Marshal. We’re fine. Max is fine. We found the missing Pony Express rider, Matt Roth – well, we found his skeleton at least. Max identified a ring it was wearing. Looks like he was killed for his horse. We need to get Doc up there to look it over and see if he can tell how the boy died. Max is staying up there to ward off the animals ‘til we get back. He suggested we bring Ike, the undertaker, when we come back.”

“You left old Max out in the snow all alone?”

“No. No. In a nice warm cave – fire blazing, a sack of apples to munch on and eighty years of exciting memories to relive. He’ll be fine.”

“I can hardly wait to hear the long version of this one, but I agree that can wait. Let’s go get Doc and Ike.”

“Our horses need to be fed and the saddle blankest turned before we make the trip back to the cave,” Jerry said.

“You can take them to the livery while the Marshal and I arrange for Doc and Ike,” Johnny said setting out the plan.

“Tell you what, boys,” the Marshal said. “You two ride on into town and take care of things. I’ll go let Bea know

you're safe and catch up to you later. Don't leave town without me – you understand?"

"Us. Do something on our own without adult supervision? What kind of kids do you think we are, anyway?"

They all laughed.

It was nearly noon before they arrived back at the cave. Doc rode with Ike in his Funeral Car (a horse drawn hearse wagon). The boys led the way and the Marshal brought up the rear.

"Just us," Johnny called into the cave as they dismounted. "Don't want you to mistake us for a pack of wolves and unload that rifle in our direction."

Max came out to meet them. The snow had stopped the night before, just the way he had predicted, and the air temperature had returned to seasonal normal – about 42 in the noon sun. The wind had stilled.

They followed Max inside and were directed to the rear of the cave. Ever-thoughtful Ike provided a lantern so Doc would be able to see there in the semi-darkness.

"Don't just stand there, boys," Doc said. "Get me a bedroll. These old knees aren't about to come face to face with this rock floor."

Doc examined the skeleton from head to feet. After ten minutes, he spoke, pointing as he did.

"A young man in his mid to late teens. Two ribs over the heart have been shattered by a slug. It will probably be found when we move the remains. No doubt it was the cause of death. Also, a broken left femur – upper leg bone. Clipped in two from another bullet. A deep groove across the shoulder blade – most likely made from still another bullet. I'd say the lad put up quite a fight against several others. The bullets each entered his body from very different angles. An ambush if I've ever seen evidence of one.

"He also had suffered a broken arm and lower leg earlier in life – they were well healed at the time he died. Probably childhood injuries the way the bones grew around the breaks."

"I'll need something to put down as the place of death for the death certificate," Doc said getting to his feet. "This cave have a name?"

They all turned to Max for the answer.

"I'm thinking it should be called the Matt Roth cave, alright?"

They all agreed.

* * *

Back in town the Marshal treated them all to a late lunch at the restaurant. Cilla joined them. Ike was not a people person so did not accompany the group. Cal turned to Johnny.

"Well, how does it feel to have another mystery solved?"

"Oh, this one is not solved yet. We still have to find the horse thieves and/or the men who killed Matt."

"That's just not going to happen – not after almost twenty years," the Marshal came back.

"And what were the odds you once gave me of finding Matt?"

"Alright – a million to one. I know. But . . ."

"What you know is you'd better just shut your mouth," Doc said looking at the Marshal. "You're not only going up against Detective Johnny Baker now, but also his apparently astute and very talented side kick, Jericho Blackfeather."

"Did you catch that?" Johnny said. "I'm JB and you're JB. When we start our detective agency we can call it JB squared or JB to the second power."

Jerry just smiled having no idea about the mathematical references. Doc had a comeback.

"And here I thought JB stood for Just Boys."

"Doc, I think you just got him," Cal said. "I've never got him. You ever got him, Cilla?"

"I've never got him. Mark the calendar, Doc."

The boys beamed into each other's faces at the by-play at their expense. They had a good thing going between them and no amount of grown-up foolishness was going to put a damper on it.

Johnny was ready to move on to phase two: Get the bad guy or guys. He began with questions.

"So, from my previous questions to you people, nobody really has any useful information about the past three saloon owners – Charlie Worth who ended up at the bottom of the

Red Hills with his neck broken, Bart Weatherly who mysteriously became its new owner upon Charlie Worth's death and then skipped out, and the current owner Frank Jackson who took over less than a year after Bart bought it at a public sale. Does that pretty well summarize the state of knowledge we have going at this point?"

He looked from one to another. Jerry couldn't imagine being that forward with a group of adults although he privately admired Johnny for his spunk (boldness).

"That's about it," Cilla said becoming the spokesperson for the rest. "Why are you so determined there is some connection between a Pony Express rider's death and the Red Bend Saloon?"

"Face it. Nothing much ever really changes here in Red Bend. But what has changed? Ownership of the Saloon. And, one owner is dead under odd circumstances, one sold out and left the territory, and it changed hands three times in two years – a place that obviously makes a lot of money changed hands three time in two years. Makes no sense."

"And what connection have you made between it and young Matt's death?" the Marshal asked.

"A mere technicality yet to come to the surface, but you can bet it has to do with that deed he was carrying. We need the name of the rancher from Nebraska."

Again, he looked from one to another receiving a wave of shrugs and blank looks.

"I still think you're barking up the wrong tree, Johnny," Cal said.

"I have to agree with the Marshal," Doc said.

Cilla nodded.

Johnny looked at Jerry.

"These people are just no fun at all. Let's go cook up something that has more action attached to it."

The boys left smiling and Johnny guided them toward the Saloon.

"Betty Ann has worked here forever as a waitress. She's known all three owners. Ken, the bartender, has been here almost as long, I'm told. They should both be fountains of information."

"Fountains of information," Jerry said. "I like that. Paints

an interesting mental picture. But, I have to ask, why are you so sure Matt's death was connected to the saloon? Surely you have more to go on than what you have shared with the others."

"You get an A+ in the study of 'Johnny'. In just a very short amount of time you've got a good handle on how I think. The others and Aunt Bea are still struggling with it."

"But you didn't answer my question."

"See. That sort of a diversion usually works on folks, but you see right through it. I'm impressed."

"And I'm still waiting for an answer."

Johnny flashed a smile. There was no hiding things from this kid. He figured that was part of being best friends.

"Tell you what. Let's conduct these next three interviews and then I'll share all my hunches with you. You may have some of your own by then."

"I can live with that. Will they let kids into the saloon?"

"Frank Jackson, the owner, is a pretty good guy. I often stop in and chat with him. Lots of times he hears things that I can pass on to Cilla and they end up as stories in her paper. Betty Ann once said if I were twenty years younger she'd hog tie me, take me to a preacher, and marry me on the spot. Ken is a talker – like most bar tenders, I guess. Just hint at a topic and he'll do thirty minutes on it without stopping for a breath."

"That's a joke, right – the not stopping for a breath?"

"Right. It's called absurdity – making a ridiculous connection between two things. I love absurdity-based humor. So does Doc. The Marshal not so much. He seems to enjoy humor, but he's not really into manufacturing it."

"Manufacturing humor! You often put words together in a strange way."

"Practicing to be a great writer someday. That reminds me, I have lots of new information to form into the next sections of my story. I'll work on that tonight while you begin reading a new novel Aunt Bea got me for my birthdays."

"Birthdays? More than one?"

"She said since I had thirteen birthdays before she really got to know me it was time she made up for all those she missed. It was just her excuse so she could do something nice for me. We both understand that, but it's not something

we speak about.”

“A new novel – that’s like a book?”

“Right. A novel is a fiction story. This one is called Treasure Island: Just published five years ago, in 1883 by a Scottish writer named Robert Lewis Stevenson. About a boy’s adventure with pirates seeking treasure on a deserted island. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“Sounds exciting. Am I really good enough at reading to read it?”

“No, but you will be by the time you finish it.”

Johnny smiled.

Jerry returned it.

“I’ve noticed that about you,” Jerry said. “You never let something stop you just because it seems like it will be impossible to do.”

“Two ‘A pluses’ for you in the study of ‘Johnny’ in one day. That has to be an all-time record.”

Jerry was beginning to recognize Johnny’s attempts at humor and no longer had to ask to make sure. He had already decided that humor, like watching girls, made life a whole lot better.”

As they approached the rear door to the saloon from the alley, Jerry stopped them and presented a possible problem.

“Most saloons won’t allow Indians to enter.”

“You let me handle that and besides, you’re technically only half Indian. If anybody gives us a problem we’ll just tell them you intended to stay an hour, but if they don’t allow Indians then we’ll only stay a half hour – your white half of the intended visiting time.”

Jerry shook his head and followed his odd friend through the door.

They were met immediately by the owner.

“Mr. Jackson – Frank – like you to meet my new friend, Jericho Black . . . His grandfather owns a huge ranch in Texas. He’s staying with Aunt Bea and me while he’s recovering from an accident he had on a recent cattle drive. Doc and Cilla and the Marshal are sort of supervising the visit.”

Johnny was very pleased about how had involved all

the big guns that could possibly be involved, without ever really telling an untruth. Nobody in Red Bend could object to a boy who wore the pedigree Johnny had just laid on him.

Frank offered him a hand.

“Welcome to Red Bend. Hope you enjoy your stay. You boys really shouldn’t be in a saloon, though, you know.”

“Oh, we’re not here like this is a saloon,” Johnny said. “We’re here like this is a center of historical information we need for a school project.”

Again, he had ‘fixed’ the facts in a relatively truthful manner.

“Well, hardly anybody in here this time of day. I suppose there’s no problem since the Marshal’s in on it. State your business.”

They moved into his office – the door had been open and stood just inside the back door. Frank motioned for them to take seats.

As a complete surprise to Johnny, Jerry took control of the opening remarks.

“We are doing a history project about the town and Johnny thought it would be an interesting thing if we wrote it around the history of this saloon. As we understand it this was one of the very first building here on Main Street.”

“That’s right. Back when it was just a wide spot on the trail west. Ask away?”

Jerry looked at Johnny as if to suggest the ball had just been passed back to him.

“Let’s just go back as far as when Charlie Worth owned it,” Johnny began. “How did he come by the place?”

“He took over when his granddaddy who owned it, died. Didn’t know Charlie, but I’m told he was a fine man and ran a stand-up place. He had it for six or so years and then met with a suspicious death out at Red Rocks.”

“Suspicious?”

It was the first time anybody but Johnny had spoken of it as being suspicious.

“I’d say so. First, nobody climbs around on those rocks but kids. Second, the way I understand it Charlie was city kid – climbing wouldn’t be his thing. Third, he was found in his church-going suit. Who’d climb those hills in their best

clothes?”

“I see. We didn’t know those things. Thanks. After him, somebody named Bart took over, is that right?”

“Yup. Bart Weatherly. Had no experience with saloons and ran the place into the ground. He allowed a bad crowd to run free in here. The good folks of the town stopped coming. That’s when the restaurant opened up across the street. The saloon, here, used to serve three meals a day. No more. Weatherly bought the place at a public sale after Charlie’s death. Got it for a song, the way the deed reads.”

“You have the deed from back then?”

“It’s an open-ended deed – that’s non-legal talk for a deed that is used over and over – just adding new names of seller and buyer at the end. Now, it’s got my signature under Bart’s.”

“It must have cost a lot of money,” Jerry asked, intentionally playing dumb.

It was a good question that didn’t put Frank on the spot, but did get to important information.

“My wife and I owned a small bar in Kansas City. After she died, I picked up stakes and went looking for something new. I saw an ad in a paper that this place was for sale – all of a sudden as it turned out – and I came to town to check it out. Bart was eager to sell – I mean really eager to sell. It was obvious he wanted to be somewhere else. I’m a pretty good business man and I played poor. He let me pay just a little down and arranged monthly payments to him – no bank in between us. I’m still making a payment every month. Can you imagine owning a place like this for ten dollars a month? I really got the best of him. Still find myself chuckling when I count the receipts at the end of the day.” [\$10 back then would have been like \$250 or so today.]

It raised lots of questions in both boys’ head, but they chose to put those on the back burner.

“Is it alright if we talk with Ken and Betty Ann,” Johnny asked, drawing that conversation to an end. “We figure they can provide us with some folksy details about famous people who have been here and things like that.”

“Sure. Ask away. They’re out front. Crowd begins to gather by six. You’ll need to be gone by then.”

“We’ll be gone well before then, I’m sure,” Johnny said as the boys stood and thanked him for his help.

They made their way to the large front room. There was a long, wide bar the length of the east side (to their left as they stood at the back looking out toward the large colorful windows and swinging doors at the front). The rest of the area was filled – in no particular pattern – with tables and chairs, most set up to accommodate four patrons. Several, larger, round, poker tables sat against the wall to the right. The story was that many thousands of dollars traded hands on those tables every year. The room smelled of cigar smoke – a foul smell as far as the boys were concerned.

Ken was behind the bar doing what bar tenders always seemed to be doing, drying glasses. Betty Ann was sitting on a stool with her legs crossed, talking with him.

Ken had clearly seen fifty. His forehead had retreated up top back even with his ears and what hair was left was more white than gray. He was short and stocky with chubby, red cheeks. He wore a vest that was a match to them in color, and a black, long sleeved shirt and black pants. That outfit was fairly interchangeable from saloon to saloon throughout the west. Ken’s vest sported a row of brass buttons down the front. Johnny had heard he kept shotguns under the counter at both ends of the bar. He had never seen them so couldn’t verify that.

“Hey, my favorite bachelor in the whole territory,” Betty Ann said to Johnny, turning toward him and reaching out, pinching his cheeks. For some reason that always sent an unfamiliar, though pleasant, warm feeling throughout his body. “Who’s the handsome dude with you today?” she asked at last.

“My new friend, Jericho – Jerry to his close friends.”

“Well, I do hope you will let me call you Jerry, sweetie, because I’d really like to be your close friend.”

She slowly ran her finger down his long black braided hair.

Jerry had NEVER before had a female talk with him in that way and he experienced feelings pretty much identical with those his friend was feeling.

Betty Ann was probably older than Ken, but it was

impossible to determine that through the layers of make-up she wore. Her hair was blond and long – whether it was really hers or a wig had been the topic of much discussion among Johnny’s friends at school. She smelled like a summer flower garden.

‘Let’s see, why am I here, again?’ Johnny had to ask himself all quite silently inside his head, of course.

///

CHAPTER NINE

“So, anyway, I got a school project going and I need some information about the Saloon’s former owners. Can you help me out?”

They nodded.

“Let’s start with, Charlie Worth, then.”

He hoped that would be enough to get Ken going. It was.

“A good employer. Ran a good clean place. He’s the one who brought gambling to the establishment – in a big way, I mean. Had some really high stakes games – a thousand-dollar buy ins. [Nearly thirty thousand in today’s money.]

“Did he gamble as well?”

“Oh, yes. And he was good. Poker was his game.”

“Players came from some distance away, did they?”

Johnny asked having remembered what he had learned from the man on the stagecoach at the time he got shot.

“They sure did,” Ken said. “As far away as New Orleans and Chicago and I know that to be a fact.”

“How many for a game?”

“Varied,” Betty Ann said. “I seen as few as four and as many as seven.”

Ken nodded, offering his agreement.

“Had Charlie won big just before his death?”

Ken and Betty Ann looked at each other. Ken spoke.

“He did. Have to say I’ve wondered if it was tied to his death.”

“Really?” Johnny said trying to act surprised.

“You betcha. Betty Ann knows more from personal

experience than I do.”

She continued the story.

“There used to be a girl who worked here named Millie – Millie Malone. She and Charlie were close. Everybody thought they’d get married someday. He died before that could happen. She and I was working the evening of one big game – the last big game, I guess. In the end there was just three left at the table – A newspaper man from Dallas, a rancher from up in Nebraska, and Charlie. The rancher had a great hand, but ran out of cash. He put up a silver mine to cover his final bet. Charlie’s hand was better. The rancher signed a chit [an IOU in gambling] and said he’d see that the deed with his signature was sent within the week. He returned home that very night.”

“And, the deed arrived safely, I assume,” Johnny went on as if he had no hunch about it.”

“Can’t say. Charlie died before the week was out.”

“Is there anybody who might know?”

“Maybe Millie,” Betty Ann continued. “She was heartbroken, I’ll tell you. She stayed on here for a year or so, but she was never the same. Later on, she married. A man named Roth, I think. I met him. Seemed like a really fine man. I think they had a couple of kids. We’ve not kept in touch. I think she wanted to cut all ties to her old memories up here.”

“That’s right – George Roth,” Ken said. “Only a thousand acres, I hear, but lots of water so he could handle more cattle per acre than ranches around here.”

“That’s great information. What about Bart Weatherly?”

“Had the place just before Frank. Owned it less than a year and then moved on west. Rumor is he’s a rich man now. No idea how that happened. He didn’t seem like a very good business man when he ran this place. Something evil about him. He seemed to attract the riffraff – all the bad apples – the scum of the earth.”

Johnny wasn’t sure he had ever heard that many clichés (meaningless, overworked, descriptive phrases) strung together in one sentence before, but he hid his amusement.

“He bought it at a sale, I’ve heard,” Johnny said, more asking than telling.

“That’s right,” Betty Ann said. “We all thought Millie would get it, but there wasn’t a will and it went to Charlie’s only living relative in Missouri. She didn’t want the place so she had it auctioned off. Bart bought it. There weren’t any other serious bidders.”

“Did Mr. Weatherly own other saloons?”

“No. He didn’t know nothing about running a place like this,” Ken said. “He relied on me mostly, but seldom took my advice about important things. I did the ordering and hiring – kept it going day by day.”

“How did he make enough money to buy the place?”

“Not entirely sure. He owned a iron works company back in Kansas City. One of the few west of the Mississippi, the way I heard it. Made wrought iron for fences and milled axles for wagons and buggies. Other things, too, I imagine.”

“Then, Frank bought it from Bart, right?”

“Darndest thing about that,” Ken said. “One day Bart come in and all out of the blue said he wanted to sell the place right away. He usually was a more patient type, but not when it came to the sale of the saloon. He put an ad in a big Kansas City paper and a week later we had a new owner . . .”

“And a much better owner,” Betty Ann added, jumping in quickly. “The day Frank set foot in the place, Bart left town.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“West,” Betty Ann said looking at Ken to see if he knew anything more specific than that.”

“I bought his stage ticket for him to Hays Kansas over in Trego County. I once heard him mention something about the Smoky Hill River area to one of the men he hung out with – an assistant with a low-slung gun if you get my drift.”

“And you haven’t heard from Bart since, I assume.”

“Not a word,” Betty Ann said.

“Ever see that man he hung with again?”

“First, Monday of every month. He comes by to pick up Frank’s payment for Weatherly – Frank’s buying it with payments. Not the usual arrangement, I’ll tell you that. It’s always cash up front for property out here away from civilization – especially money making property like this.”

Johnny chuckled at his insinuation Red Bend was not civilized – not cultured, perhaps, but certainly more civilized in

many ways than Kansas City had been in his mind. People in Red Bend took good care of each and that, Johnny had come to think, was the most civilized thing people could do.

The boys thanked their informants and said they might be back later. They scooted out the front door while Mr. Jackson wasn't looking. Johnny wanted to check in with the Marshal.

"So, did you locate Matt's parents back in Missouri?"

"Yup. Sent them a telegram. Haven't received a answer. You have a hunch about how they will react?"

He had been kidding about the boy and his hunches, but Johnny had an answer.

"I'm thinking they won't want to have anything to do with him if his father has anything to say about it. Matt and his father had a serious falling out. I can go even further than that. I think that when Matt was a little boy his father beat on him. Doc found two broken bones from back when he was young. I'm thinking Matt left to get away from being mistreated. My best guess is that his uncle, George Roth, will be the one who will take care of things."

"I telegraphed George as well. Haven't heard from him either."

"I feel sure you will," Johnny said.

"I figure if all else fails, Max will see to things," the Marshal said.

The boys left and stopped at the telegraph office where Johnny sent a wire to his attorney in Kansas City. He wanted him to find out about Bart Weatherly – what his iron works company made, what his reputation was, and if he still had interests there.

"I'll have to pay you tomorrow, Gus. Not packing enough today. Be in right after the bank opens."

Gus waved him off. He understood the boy would be good for it, although how an orphan could afford to send telegrams was beyond him. Once outside, Jerry had a question about it as well.

"Aren't telegrams expensive and do you really have a bank account?"

"Yes and yes. I came into a little money after my parents died. I'd just like to leave it at that. If you ever need

to know more, I'll tell you."

"I can live with that. Now what?"

"Back home, I guess. The horses should be well rested. Diab likes to run full out at sunset. How about Pinto?"

"Pinto likes to run full out any time. He's a much shorter horse so probably won't be able to keep up."

"It will be interesting to see what happens. I have a hunch it'll end up in a dead heat (tie)."

"With you at the reins, I wouldn't doubt it." (Meaning Johnny would see to it that Pinto didn't lose.)

"Tell you what. I'll tie the reins loose around the saddle horn so Diab can set his own pace and I'll still be right."

Johnny looked puzzled, but he was getting used to having that reaction to much of what his new friend proposed.

They made one final stop before arriving at the livery stable.

"So, Doc, have a minute," Johnny asked speaking as they entered the door to his office.

"Always for you. What's on your mind?"

"Charlie Worth. I watched you go over Matt's remains with a fine-toothed comb this morning. It made me wonder how completely you went over Charlie when he was found at the bottom the Red Rocks."

"You must remember that he was virtually my very first patient when I arrived back here in Red Bend."

"At least you couldn't make him any worse than he was. Sorry, that was in poor taste. Still. My question."

"I must admit I saw things I didn't understand at that time."

"May I guess?"

"Why not? You can just bypass all the years of medical training and hang out your shingle across the street."

"I'll take that as good natured ribbing. Here's my guess. There were marks around his wrists like his hands had been tied."

"Yes. They didn't represent severe burns, but upon reflection they could have represented something other than shirt cuffs that had been too strongly starched like I had originally thought. He was all dressed up."

"I'm going one step further," Johnny said. "They had

been tied behind his back. If they had been in front, he'd have put out his hands and arms to break his fall so they would have most likely been broken in numerous places. Instead of that, you found the skull and shoulders broken, but the arms and hands intact."

"Those seem like reasonable hypotheses. But there were no ropes on his wrists when he was found. No indication anybody else had been there with him."

"Would you leave ropes on somebody's wrists you'd just pushed off a forty-foot cliff?"

"I suppose not. Have you shared those thoughts with the Marshal?"

"Not yet. Needed to confer with you first – you've been my partner in solving mysteries ever since I came to town. We just have a few more pieces of the puzzle and we'll have this one all wrapped up."

"Should I ask?"

"Probably not quite yet? Jerry and I have a bit more poking around to do in the morning."

Doc turned to Jerry.

"Did you know you had a bit more poking around to do in the morning?"

"Well, I figured as much, since that often seems to be as close to knowing as it gets when you're with Johnny."

"You have learned fast, Jericho. You do understand that you may have to be careful for both of you, right?"

"Oh, yes, sir from the very first time he said, 'what would you think if we . . .'"

Doc nodded his approval and sent them on their way.

With horses saddled they mounted up and turned a sharp left onto Main Street heading east toward home. They walked their mounts to the far edge of town where, as promised, Johnny tied the loose reins to his saddle.

"It's all up to you, now, Jerry. Let's see what Pinto has to offer."

Jerry gently kneed his horse and they were off on the run. Diablo, just as Johnny had figured, kept pace with him but made no move to take the lead. He was as kind and gentle as his master.

They arrived at the front porch at the same moment.

“A good work out, I’d say,” Johnny said.

He dismounted.

“I got some wood to chop before supper. How about you take care of the horses?”

Jerry nodded and said:

“I’ll get myself on the business end of that axe before the month’s over. You just wait and see. Feeling stronger every day.”

He moved on around the house toward the stable.

With the horses cared for and wood chopped and taken inside, the boys washed up for supper. It still seemed like a futile (pointless) act to Jerry. His hands would just get dirty all over again.

Johnny looked his friend’s right arm up and down.

“Looks to me like those cuts have all healed up really well. I can see a bath in your schedule on Saturday night.”

Jerry put on a pretend shiver. It was met with smiles from the others that he had hoped for.

After supper Aunt Bea said, “Well, if that arm’s ready for a bath I’m sure it’s also ready for dish water.”

She playfully tossed a dish rag in his direction.

“I spent many hours washing and drying for Cookie. I can see how it makes sense to wash dishes, unlike washing other things.”

Jerry insisted that Johnny get busy on his story while he helped Bea.

“Can I ask what’s baking,” he said.

“You can and you may,” Bea said.

“I don’t understand the difference.”

Johnny interrupted to offer the explanation.

“Can means you have the skill to do something. May means you have permission to do something.”

Jerry thought about it for a few moments and then nodded.

“I think I can understand that. May I put it that way?”

“Again, you can and you may. That’s great.”

Bea offered a comment.

“I hope you understand I wasn’t trying to put you down. Johnny and I just help each other out that way – he helps me out more than I do him when it comes to grammar. He was

raised in a family where perfect English was spoke – that would be ‘was spoken’. That was not the case here in Red Bend when I was growing up. Cilla’s and Doc’s families were about the only places you’d hear things said properly around here.”

“What did Doc’s father do?

“He was teacher – had taught in a college early in his life.”

Jerry nodded, meaning thank you. He had many things to learn. Things, which a month before, he didn’t even know were possibilities. He felt quite lucky at that point in his life. He didn’t know what his future would hold for him, but he’d learned from Johnny that whatever it was he was going to find a way to make it work great for him.

It was strawberry-rhubarb pie that came out of the oven a half hour later. In the meantime, Jerry had begun struggling through the words in Treasure Island. He chose a seat on the floor in front of the fireplace to the right side of Bea and when he needed help, which was often, he would hold up the book and point. She could call the words without ever missing a stitch in her knitting. Now that there was an additional member in the household, she had to pick up her pace so she could work in one more whatever it was she was making for Christmas gifts.

While enjoying the pie at the table, Johnny read them the first draft of the second installment of his story.

With the bandits riding on ahead on a wild goose chase, Matt mounted up and circled north and west to avoid them and still keep to his route. His horse was fast and he gave her her head. They rode hard knowing the station was less than a half hour ahead.

He pulled to a stop on top of a rise from where he could see the station in the distance. The sight was not a good one. It was on fire. The horses were gone from the corral at the rear and there was nobody in sight. In the oath he’d taken to become a rider, he’d sworn that he would let nothing interfere with his ride so, as much as he wanted to stop and see if there were people needing help, he continued his swing north and would press on toward the next station ten miles away. He debated whether or not to meet up with the road west of the

station. It would be faster, but with outlaws and suddenly horse thieves in the vicinity, he'd be a sitting target as he rode through the only pass for twenty miles in both directions. He had a strong horse – fresh just an hour before – and he was sure she had the endurance they would need. He pressed on as the dark of the moonless night pressed in on him.

Coyotes bayed from the hillside. He unstrapped the handle of his six-shooter in case trouble might lie just ahead.

The others agreed they liked it. Aunt Bea suggested he add more description of the building, the fire, and the trail. Jerry wondered if he might have some more imaginative words to use in describing the fire and smoke.

They were good suggestions and he'd incorporate them into his second draft. Johnny always appreciated suggestions – he didn't always follow them, but he figured they gave him new options if he felt he needed them.

* * *

The next morning the boy's first stop was at the Marshal's office. Nobody was there so they went next door to the telegraph office and woke Gus.

"Did the Marshal hear back from either Roth family?"

"Both. The one in Missouri said: USE YOUR OWN JUDGMENT. WILL NOT BE COMING. The other one said: WILL LEAVE FOR RB IMMEDIATELY.

"So, Matt's Uncle George and Millie will be in charge of things the way it looks," Johnny said. "I'm glad Millie will be here. She may be able to shed some light on things that took place at the saloon."

As they were leaving the telegraph station the Marshal was riding up.

"Did you see the telegrams you got from the Roth families?"

"Yes. I assume you sweet talked Gus into telling you what was in them."

"With Gus no sweet talking is ever necessary; you know that."

He nodded as he dismounted and tied Gray to the hitching rail.

"I've made arrangements for a funeral – parson, Ike, cemetery. If George and Millie want something different, it

can be rearranged. Just thought we needed to be ready.”

“Have you had time to study the slug we found under the skeleton?” Johnny asked.

“I have. Took it over to Ben Withers. He knows more about firearms than anybody I know. It’s a mystery of a sort all by itself, Johnny. He says it’s a 10.6 mm slug probably fired from a German made revolver. I’ve never seen one. He says they seldom make it this far west. A good gun, but really expensive – imported and all. The slug looks a whole lot different from the .44 and .45 mm bullets that have been in common use around here for the past twenty years. He has a picture of the gun if you’re interested in seeing it.”

“We may stop over at his place, later,” Johnny said. “That does seem like a very distinctive clue, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’d have to agree with you on that one, but I doubt if the gun has hung around for twenty years – not that properly taken care of it couldn’t still be in good shape – but it’s just a long time you understand.”

“When’s the funeral if it goes off as planned?”

“Tomorrow at one at the church.”

“We’ll be there.”

The boys headed for the bank to withdraw money for the telegrams. Johnny got out a little extra. Jerry was clearly amazed that a boy had a bank account – with real money in it. Johnny paid Gus and they headed across town to Mr. Withers place to see the picture of the German revolver.

He was an old man who had been in charge of ordnance (weapons and ammunition) during the war. If it had to do with guns, he knew it. Johnny knew the man by sight, but had really never spent any time with him. Withers, on the other hand seemed to know all about Johnny and met him at his front porch with his hand out.

“Who’s your friend, Johnny? Don’t recall seeing him before.”

“This is Jerecho – Jerry. He’s staying out with Aunt Bea and me for a while. When it comes to horses, he knows it all.”

Jerry extended his hand and Ben gave a warm and prolonged shake. Johnny was pleased. As far as he

remembered it was the first-time Jerry had initiated such a gesture. He figured that meant he was becoming more comfortable – about Red Bend and probably about himself as well.

“We came to see the picture of the 10.6 mm German revolver the Marshal said you had.”

“He said I should be expecting you. Let me get it.”

He went inside and returned immediately and opened a large book to a page he had marked with a scrap of paper.

“A beautiful gun – if guns can be beautiful,” Johnny said.

“Hard to come by out here and nearly impossible to get ammunition for them. Just one place in KC still keeps a supply. Expensive. The Marshal showed me the slug – hardly damaged. I figure it came out of a person. Flesh and bone are no match for that heavy German lead blend. Fire it against piece of iron and it spreads out into a nearly perfect round disk not jagged like the led used around here.”

Although all of that was interesting, it was a good deal more than the boys needed to know.

“One place in Kansas City, you say. Can you give us a name?”

“I can do better than that. Here’s the advertising card from the company. I have several.”

He removed it from his wallet and handed it to Johnny. Johnny looked at it and handed it on to Jerry. To Jerry it meant two very important things. First that he was a part of the J B Squared team and that he was now expected to be able to read such things. And, he could. Neither Ben nor Johnny understood the broad grin that blossomed across Jerry’s face. For Jerry, it marked another very important moment in his life.

“Got that picture tucked away inside that remarkable head of yours?” Jerry asked his friend.

“If I ever see it, I’ll know it.”

That was good enough for Johnny. They thanked Ben and began the walk back toward Main Street. Jerry had a question.

“What did you mean just now – that I had a remarkable head?”

“You’re about the smartest kid I’ve ever known – that’s what I meant.”

“But I can’t even read or do numbers and I don’t know the meaning of lots of words you and Doc and Cilla use.”

“Alright. Here’s how I see it – and so does Doc, by the way. Last night you read the first chapter in a book that most 8th graders have trouble reading – and you read it after just a couple of weeks of reading instruction. Let’s see: eight years of instruction compared with two weeks

of instruction. Now do you understand?”

“Sort of. My father said I was smart, but I always just figured he said that because he was my father.”

“But . . .?” Johnny said encouraging him to think further.

“But . . . if you and Doc also think so – the two smartest people I’ve ever met – then there may be something to it.”

“Well, that’s a good start on your journey of self-discovery. I’ll take that much for now.”

Johnny needed to pay his livery bill. He had withdrawn money to cover it. They entered the stable and each of them spent a few moments patting and talking with their horses. Harry – Harry Carter the owner - wasn’t out in the stable area.

“Must be in his office up at the front,” Johnny said.

The office door was open. Johnny knocked on the door frame and poked his head inside. The man was sprawled out on the floor, on his back, clutching his chest.

He looked up into Johnny’s face.

“Get Doc. My heart, I think.”

CHAPTER TEN

Johnny spoke to Jerry.

“You stay with him and I’ll go get Doc.”

It hadn’t been a command, but merely an on the spot distribution of labor and Jerry understood that.

When he returned with Doc and the Marshal they found Jerry applying a wet rag to the man’s forehead and talking with him in low, reassuring tones. He had folded a horse blanket and put it under his head.

The Marshal carried Harry up to Doc’s office. Johnny and Jerry went along. Once they understood he was in good hands, the boys prepared to leave so they wouldn’t be in Doc’s way.

Harry put out his hand and touched Jerry.

“Please stay.”

It was meant just for Jerry, and Johnny understood. The two of them looked at each other and Johnny nodded. Jerry moved closer and took the man’s hand in his. Doc nodded offering his approval.

Johnny left. He knew Doc preferred to have as small an audience as possible. He stopped at the newspaper office and let Cilla know about Harry. The stage was due in from the south any time. He walked down the sidewalk to the stage office.

The cloud of dust he had seen to the south from Doc’s front window signaled the stage was getting close. He hoped George and Millie Roth would be on it. They might, of course, have been coming by horseback or buggy.

While he waited – sitting on the wide board sidewalk

feet in the street – a stranger rode by on a beautiful horse, brown with a black mane. It wore expensive tack with silver studs on the saddle and saddle bags and silver ornamentation cascading down the stirrups. He had entered Main Street from the west. His large brimmed, black felt hat had a wide silver band inset with green stones. Everything about him shouted money. He wore a long, leather, trail coat suggesting he had come some distance. The horse was well lathered (the bubbly sweat that forms on a hot horse), which further supported that.

The man tied up in front of the saloon, but walked a few doors east to the restaurant. Once off his horse, Johnny could see he was tall, slender and clean shaven except for a narrow, well-waxed, handlebar moustache.

Johnny turned his attention back to the approaching stage, which by then had entered the street from the same direction – the Dallas to Kansas City run. He removed his hat in anticipation of getting to help the beautiful Millie Roth from the coach to the street. He was not disappointed.

“How sweet of you to meet me,” she said. “George is riding in later this morning. He had things to take care of before he left and I preferred the luxury of the stage over forty miles riding sidesaddle through the dust.”

“Will you be staying at the hotel?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. I assume they will have room. We had no way to work that out ahead of time.”

“I’m sure they will have a room this time of year. Let me get your bag, assuming you brought a boy sized bag.”

They exchanged smiles. For her age, she remained quite beautiful and stood straight and graceful in her long, shiny, green skirt and matching, hooded, jacket. She smelled of lavender – no surprise to Johnny.

They were soon in the hotel lobby and she signed the big register book.

“If you will help me to the room with my valise, I’ll treat you to breakfast. I assume whether or not you have already eaten a young man your age can always eat more.”

“You seem to know young men my age very well, but I can pay for my own meal.”

“Nonsense. George would insist.”

Millie chose a table toward the front of the big room – it was the proper place for ladies even when accompanied by a young man. Of all the women Johnny had seen in there, only Cilla ever ventured to the back of the room – a situation required if she wanted to sit with Doc.

“First, you have my condolences on your loss,” Johnny said after they had placed their orders.

“We never met the boy, you understand, but kin is kin and we want to do right by him. Do you know if other relatives are coming?”

“The telegram from his parents indicated they won’t be coming. That’s so hard for me to understand. If you have relatives I’d think they would be precious to you.”

“Matt’s father is really not a very nice person. He and his son never got along well according to George.”

“I got that idea – that his father may have even been physically abusive to him,” Johnny said, hoping he hadn’t overstepped some limit.

“That’s what I understand, although I don’t know how you could know that.”

Johnny explained and that explanation opened things up to other matters. Millie was easy to talk with and she seemed willing to reveal personal information. Perhaps that was because she suddenly found herself in familiar surroundings and her husband was not present, Johnny thought.

“I don’t mean to bring up an unhappy past, but I have some questions about Mr. Worth – Charlie Worth.”

“Charlie and I had some wonderful years together, but I have left that behind. It’s no problem to talk about it and is mostly happy.”

“I get the idea he was about to come into a good deal of money just before he died – Charlie, I mean.”

“He had won a silver mine from a rancher – Lawrence Latham – in one of his famous, big stakes poker games. It wasn’t a working mine yet, but those close to it were producing large amounts of silver – some mixed in with gold and zinc. Charlie was excited about the prospect of a new adventure.”

“May I guess that mine was over along the Smoky Hill

River in Prego County?”

“Again, your information surprises me. Yes. Near Hays, Kansas.”

“This rancher – Latham. He was a stranger at the time of the poker game.”

“Not really. He had played several times before; in fact, he had played pretty much even – won as much as he’d lost over several games spread out over several months.”

“What do you know about the deed that Charlie was to receive?”

“Not a whole lot. Latham signed a chit with the understanding he’d send the deed by a special Pony Express rider – some riders did special duty like that, strictly off the pay roll.”

“I know about that. Matt was on such duty when he met his death. I believe he was the rider who was carrying the deed.”

“Really. We had no idea.”

“Was there anything unusual about the deed or the transaction that you know of?”

“Like all Charlie’s non-cash winnings, he had them made out to the Red Bend Salon instead of him. Had to do with taxes or something. I really don’t know the reason.”

“That helps. Thanks. My next question is the really important one. Who, besides Charlie and Latham, would have known about the special delivery arrangement?”

“I have no idea. Latham seemed to have an arrangement with a rider – Matt I suppose from what I’ve learned from you. He had made runs for the ranch before, the way I understood it.”

“What about the others at the poker table. Would they have overheard?”

“It was only the News Paper man and he left as soon as he folded. I doubt if he was even there during the time the arrangements were being discussed.”

At that moment, the tall slender stranger Johnny had seen earlier, walked by the table on his way to pay his bill at the front of the restaurant. Millie’s face flushed and her brow furrowed.

“Is something wrong?” Johnny asked.

“That Man. I know him – well I know about him. Older but I’m sure it’s him.”

“And ‘him’ would be . . .?”

“Bart Weatherly’s right hand man – Luke.”

“And you know him how?”

“From the days Bart owned the saloon. And that reminds me of something that may relate to some of your questions. He and Bart were both in the saloon the night of that poker game. Bart wasn’t playing, but he was there. It was the first time I’d ever seen him. I waited on him. I gathered from things I overheard that he and Luke were on their way back to Kansas City from somewhere out west.”

“Good stuff, Millie – er, Mrs. Roth, sorry.”

“Please, call me Millie. It makes me feel right at home back here in Red Bend. Haven’t been back since I left. Can you believe that?”

Johnny assumed it had been a rhetorical question (one not requiring an answer) so he let it be. Anyway, at that moment his attention became directed elsewhere. The gun strapped to Luke’s right side was a 10.6mm German Revolver – the very one he had just seen in Ben’s book.

Suddenly, Johnny had all the pieces of the puzzle he needed to solve the murder of Matt Roth. He excused himself.

“Give me just a moment, Millie. I’ll be right back.”

He followed Luke to the door and tried to strike up a conversation while the man lit a small cigar out on the sidewalk.

“Some gun you have there, Sir. Never saw one just like it before.”

The man seemed pleased about the comment and was more than willing to brag about it.

“German made. Finest revolver ever made to my thinking.”

“Looks like an odd size cartridge. Sure not the .44 and .45 I know about around here. Not familiar with that.”

“Probably the only gun in the state that takes 10.6 millimeter, son. Not surprised you’ve never saw it. Some say the newer Mausers are better, but I don’t believe this one could ever be improved on. Had it for twenty-five years.

Needed a few replacement parts, but it's as good today as the day it was made."

Johnny had the information he needed. He was standing toe to toe with the man who had killed Matt Roth. He knew why. He knew how. He just had to prove it. After all those years, it would be impossible to prove from evidence – one slug. [Bullet identification from barrel marking was still decades into the future.] A judge would call it circumstantial. Johnny was sure Luke could manufacture an alibi that would put him a hundred miles away at the time of the crime. There was only one way. Get the man to incriminate himself.

Like Doc had indicated to Jerry, Johnny often needed somebody else to force him to be careful. At that moment, there was no, somebody else. He continued speaking to the man although the conversation took an intentionally different turn.

"I know your name is Luke and I know that about twenty years ago, you killed the Pony Express rider for Bart Weatherly in order to obtain the deed to the silver mine on Smokey Hill River. The boy's name was Matt Roth, although I suppose you don't care. It is your revolver that will incriminate you. The slug in his body was 10.6 mm and according to your own expertise on the subject, you're the only one who carries one like that in all of Kansas."

"You're wrong of course, but who else knows about this notion of yours?"

Johnny realized everything depended on how he answered that question. If he said he had told others – like the Marshal – Luke might just make a break for it and try to disappear. If he said nobody else knew, then Luke would probably opt to quiet Johnny – that was the only way he knew of to truly incriminate the man. Once that was accomplished Johnny figured Luke would sing like a birdy to take down Bart with him. The choice was clear.

"Nobody else knows. Just me. Pretty smart for a little kid, huh?"

Luke reached out and grabbed Johnny by his arm, forcing him into a narrow walkway between the buildings. He prodded him toward the alley where he pushed him to the rear of the saloon – a building the man knew inside out from his

days there with Bart.

They entered the cellar door to the left of the rear door to the building. It was a door that had to be pulled up and they descended a dozen steps into the basement. Johnny began thinking he may not have thought his move through well enough.

The room was pitch-dark. Luke lit a match and soon had a lantern lighting that part of the large cellar – if dimly. Johnny put on a cocky manner, while feeling anything but cocky inside.

“Big man manhandling a little kid. I suppose that makes you feel important or superior. Makes me think you’re a coward.”

The words had just rolled off his tongue without ever engaging his brain to think how they might affect the man. It had not been good. Luke slapped him hard across the face. Johnny could taste blood oozing from the corner of his mouth. He figured he needed to buy time – for just what he wasn’t sure. He thought if he were tied up the man might feel like he had more time to plan out what he should do. More time seemed like a very good thing right about then.

“I’m going to make a run for it at the very first opportunity I see,” he said.

The man fell for it and forced him into a wooden chair. There was a rope hanging on a peg beside the door and Johnny was soon bound tightly in a sitting position. ‘So far so good,’ Johnny thought to himself.

Few other human beings would have seen that situation as a good thing.

“So, I also have reason to put you at Red Rocks at the time of Charlie Worth’s death. As I recall you tied his hands behind him and forced him to climb the hill with you. You pushed him off and he fell. Then you made your way back down, removed the ropes and left thinking you made it look like an accident. You left several clues behind that I believe prove it wasn’t an accident. I can even prove you tied and untied his hands.” (That may have been stretching the truth just a bit!)

Luke had still not spoken since he took hold of the boy out on the street. Johnny continued.

“Bart had you, or some other employee, hang around Latham’s ranch to learn when the Rider was coming for the deed. That allowed you and a couple of other hired guns to waylay Matt and kill him.

“The next part was pretty smart, I must admit. Bart’s iron works company in Kansas City made the horseshoes for the Pony Express Company so Bart knew about the secret code they carried to help identify stolen horses. He instructed you to remove the shoes from the Rider’s horse so it would look like nothing more than horse thievery by somebody who didn’t want to be caught with a horse wearing those shoes. Problem was, nobody outside the organization knew about the shoes so I figured it wouldn’t have been just any horse thief – had to be somebody who knew that secret. I must admit that stumped me until my attorney sent me some information about the iron works company. In other words, by removing the shoes the thief gave himself away instead of avoiding getting caught. And, after all that careful planning a compassionate Indian buried the boy along with the horseshoes you left behind to set things up. They were never found so the elaborate ruse (trick) never got set into play.

“Since the Deed was made out to the Red Bend Saloon, only the owner of the saloon had any right to it. I imagine Bart first tried to buy the place from Charlie Worth and when he couldn’t, he had him killed so he could buy it at sale and come by the deed legally – well, sort of legally.

“That pretty well brings us up to date. I suppose you could shoot me but then it would be the same gun that killed Matt and sooner or later it will be discovered that you are the bad guy in both killings. I imagine you are way too smart to put a slug in me that will automatically tie you to both my death and Matt’s death. But, if you just leave me here, you know I’ll tell the Marshal about you. I’m sure that sets up a quandary (predicament) for you.”

There were alternative methods of doing somebody in, but Johnny had not taken sufficient time to consider them. He figured there were probably several things going in his favor – at that moment he just couldn’t think what they might be. It seemed appropriate to have Luke admit to what he’d done. His actions seemed to verify all of Johnny’s hunches but it

would be good to hear the man claim them.

“You going to deny I’m right about everything I’ve said?”

“So, you’re right about it all. You’re in no position to ever use it against me.”

“You mean you’re admitting to killing both Charlie and Matt?” Johnny said as if surprised.

“Sure, and I’m about to make it Charlie, Matt and Snoopy Brat – or whatever your name is.”

Johnny gulped. He was out of ideas to stall the man. He figured asking to go to the bathroom was out of the question. Luke walked toward him, snapping a short length of rope between his hands. Johnny understood. At that moment, he wished he had a size 1,000 neck. He didn’t. He began screaming while he could. A half dozen lanterns suddenly lit out of the darkened front section of the basement.

“Luke Potter. You are under arrest on multiple murder charges and for the abduction and threatening the life of a minor.”

It had been Cal’s strong deep voice. Deputies advanced with their guns drawn and disarmed Luke. Luke turned and looked at Johnny and spat in his face. Almost immediately Jerry was at his friend’s side untying the ropes that bound him to the chair.

“You have some explaining to do, Jericho Blackfeather,” Johnny said with a clearly disturbed tone.

The others all look dumbfounded.

“I have some explaining to do. You’re the reckless, thoughtless, careless, foolish, imbecilic, kid who went off half-cocked and almost got himself killed.”

The Marshal stepped forward and nodded.

“What he said. This has to be the confounded, dumbest thing you’ve ever done, son.”

“I caught the bad guy. Don’t I get some credit for that?”

The Marshal looked at Jerry and together they turned toward Johnny and delivered their answer:

“NO!!!”

“What you get is the Idiot of the Year Award, came Cilla’s voice out of the darkness.

She moved into the light and administered the hug of all

hugs to Johnny.

“You’re just not giving yourselves enough credit, guys?”

Johnny went on.

Again, they looked at each other, fully puzzled.

“What?” the Marshal said responding for all of them.

“You saved me. I knew you would save me. I have complete faith in you people. As far as I was concerned I was never in any danger whatsoever. In Red Bend, we all take care of each other.”

The others shook their heads. Johnny smiled. He just couldn’t understand why they all seemed so upset.

* * *

Back in the restaurant a full set of explanations were presented to Johnny by the Marshal.

“Millie got concerned when you didn’t come back from following Luke to the door. She got up and went to see what was going on. She met Jericho on the sidewalk at the door. He recognized Millie from, the perfume you had described to him. He had left Doc’s when Harry went to sleep and had come looking for you. He pointed, seeing Luke and you turning to go between the buildings. While he followed you, Millie came to get me. By the time I crossed the street, Jericho was back reporting you had been taken down into the cellar. Cilla came to see what was going on.

“Millie knew about the inside stairway to the cellar. We gathered several lanterns – unlit – and made our way downstairs in darkness. We heard your voice. It was Jericho who first realized what you were up to – making Luke confess out loud hoping somebody else would be listening. We were. I’ll wire the Marshal out in Prego County and we’ll pretty well have this wrapped up.”

“We’ll? We’ll have it wrapped up?” Johnny said playing for the dramatic.

The Marshal shrugged.

“Alright. Mostly you, but according to your own admission, we all helped – remember – here in Red Bend we all take care of each other.”

“There were laughs all around – some were laughs of relief and some just at the humor of the Marshal’s comment (A joke from the Marshal? - a first as far as any of them could

remember!).

* * *

Several weeks passed. Christmas was growing near. There had been snow on the ground ever since Johnny and Jerry's night in the cave.

A number of nice things had taken place. Matt's funeral was attended by an overflow crowd, which, as a last-minute arrival, included his mother. His grave was marked by a simple white cross which bore a Pony Express horseshoe – open end up.

Jericho finished Treasure Island with the idea if he could read that he could read anything (probably true!).

Harry Carter from the livery stable was recovering nicely from his heart attack, but Doc said it would be at least six months before he could even think about returning to working full time. Harry and Jerry had become good friends. Harry asked Jerry – with his broad knowledge of horses – to take over for him while he recovered. After consultation with his new friends he accepted the offer and moved into the room upstairs at the rear of the building – a room of his own. It was hard for him to believe how well life was turning out.

Doc and Cilla took Jericho on as their second, high school student. He turned out to have just as quick a mind as Johnny suspected. Thinking ahead together, they planned to finish their high school studies there in Red Bend during the next four years and eventually go on to college together. All quite mysteriously, Jerry received a scholarship to the college of his choice from some group that only identified itself as the DAJOWMSF. [Do you suppose that could have been Doc And Johnny's Old West Mystery Scholarship Fund?]

Christmas came for Johnny and Jerry at Aunt Bea's. There was a tree with colorful homemade decorations, a front door wreath, green and red dyed oats for Diab and Pinto (Johnny's idea, of course!), Christmas pastries and a golden brown roasted turkey with yams for dinner. And, oh yes, each boy received a hand knitted sweater, a new scarf, and a pair of gloves – for their feet!

The End

(Johnny's completed Pony Express story will be found below.)

MATT ROTH: PONY EXPRESS RIDER

(A fictionalized account based on a real person.)

By Johnny Baker

(With editorial assistance from Cilla, Bea, and Jericho)

A four-part serial in the Red Bend, Kansas, Newspaper
December, 1880

Installment Number One:

At that moment, Flash, Matt's beautiful, coal black mare, needed to live up to her name. Through the dust, which her powerful hoofs were kicking up there on the trail, Matt could barely make out the three men closing on him from the rear, guns blazing. If he took out his six-shooter and turned to return fire, he would slow the horse, so he bent low along her long, sleek, neck and urged her on.

Up ahead was a low hill with large rock outcroppings on both sides of the trail. His quick young mind immediately had a plan. When he passed the first of them he pulled Flash to the right and dismounted, leading her to relative safety in the deep shadows behind the largest of them. The evening breeze blew the dust she had kicked up on down the trail for some distance. The riders rushed on by as if chasing a ghost in the near darkness.

Matt led Flash down the rise to the north and took refuge in a deep gully. If the riders were able to track him, he was in perfect position to fire on them before they got to him. He knew he did not dare stay long. After all, he was a Pony Express rider and speedy deliveries always had to be his first concern.

Installment Number Two:

With the bandits riding ahead on a wild goose chase, Matt mounted up and circled north and west to avoid them and still keep close to his route. His horse was fast and he gave her her head. They rode hard knowing the station was less than a half hour out. He had switched horses seven times already that day and there were still three more before sleep could come.

He paused ever so briefly on top of a rise from where he knew he should be able to see the station in the distance.

The sight was not a good one. If it had not been for the fact it was on fire, he would not have been able to see it at all there in the pitch black of the overcast night. White smoke billowed into low lying clouds, their undersides reflecting the red and orange of the raging flames below. The horses were gone from the corral at the rear and there was nobody in sight.

In the oath, he had taken to become a rider, he had sworn that he would let nothing interfere with his ride and the delivery of the mail, so, as much as he wanted to stop and see if there were people needing help, he continued his swing north and would press on toward the next station ten miles ahead without the benefit of a fresh horse.

He debated whether or not to circle south and meet back up with the road west of the station. It would be faster, but with outlaws and horse thieves suddenly in the vicinity, he'd be a sitting target as he rode through the only wagon pass for twenty miles in both directions. He had a strong horse – fresh just an hour before – and he was sure she had the endurance they would need. He pressed on as the deep darkness of the night pressed in on him.

Coyotes bayed from the hillside. Matt unstrapped the handle of his six-shooter in case trouble – from animals or man – might be waiting just ahead.

Installment Number Three:

Matt knew the alternate route up and over the steep hill, and he urged Flash on as they began to climb the rocky slope. It was a choice between speed and the risk of his mount stumbling and falling – or worse – among the jagged formations that spread across the ground before them. Without a horse he had no chance at all of keeping to his schedule – one hour between stations – so he slowed and walked her up the slope. She picked her way carefully. Matt knew the Pony Express horses were the best the west had to offer. He and Flash must take good care of each other.

He spotted a campfire off to the north, just ahead. As his mount's feet hit small rocks they were sent rolling down the hill behind them. He dismounted without really stopping and slowed her to an easier walk. That way, fewer stones were dislodged and there would be less chance they would be

heard by the men nearby. They passed so close to the fire they could smell the bacon and hear the rowdy voices.

It couldn't have been the riders who had been after him. He was sure he had outdistanced them by that point. It might, however, have been the horse thieves that had attacked the station. He whispered low to Flash to keep her calm in the face of the fire and the scent of other horses.

They were soon past the camp and Matt was again in the saddle. The down side of the hill was in grass and they picked up the pace.

Installment Number Four:

At last it was no more than a fifteen-minute run to the next station. Matt hoped the gang of outlaws had not also attacked and burned it. In the dark of that night he wouldn't know until he was upon it – unless it was also aflame.

At the bottom of the hill, Sandy Creek followed the valley from north to south. It was not shallow enough for wagons to cross, but he felt sure a horse and rider could ford it. He had heard reports of heavy rain north into Nebraska and hoped that had not swollen the Creek that far South.

Without hesitation – Pony Express riders never hesitated unless there was no other way – Matt and Flash started across the level valley floor toward the water. It was some higher than usual, but since he had no alternative, he urged his horse out into the creek. Flash was immediately up her knees, then her flanks. Matt's boots were soon under water. By the time they approached the middle of the stream, it was close to the top of his saddle. In a well-practiced maneuver, he stood tall in the saddle and pulled the mochila out from under him and held it high over his head. It wouldn't do to allow the mail in the four pouches to get wet. The current became more rapid and powerful as they entered the middle of the stream.

It was at that point the unthinkable happened. Shots rang out from the creek bank behind him. He didn't need to turn and look. He could hear a number of horses enter the water, splashing their way after him. The swirling dark clouds overhead worked in his favor by blocking the moon. Again, he bent low to his mount's neck hoping to cut whatever silhouette

they might present to a minimum. Flash sensed the danger and picked up her pace. The water gradually became shallower.

Just as they climbed the far bank, and Matt had begun to think his chances had suddenly improved, the clouds broke above them. The moon shown through and lit the area. On the down side, the outlaws could now see him all quite plainly. On the up side, he saw the station not a hundred yards ahead. Flash picked up her pace and crossed the distance like a race horse. Things suddenly got even better. Shots rang out from up ahead. The men at the station had heard the shooting and once the moon came out their rifles could begin hitting their marks.

The outlaws turned in retreat. Matt and Flash were safe. He understood he still had one more lap to finish that night. In front of the Station he made a quick running dismount, flung the mochila over the saddle on the waiting fresh horse and in less than fifteen seconds – always his goal – continued on his way west.

He figured the newly acquired hole in his hat would only make his next daytime ride under the blazing Nebraska sun that much cooler.

The End

[You knew Johnny well enough to know he wouldn't let the bad guys win, now, didn't you!]

THE END