

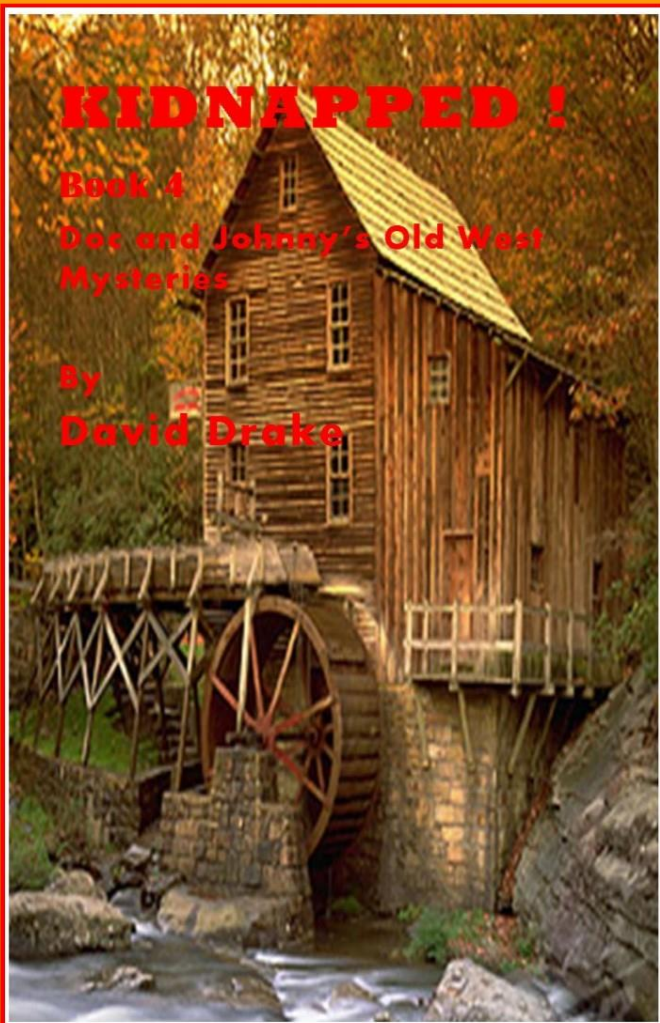
KIDNAPPED !

Book 4

**Doc and Johnny's Old West
Mysteries**

By

David Drake



Kidnapped!

The *Fourth 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:* Red Bend Bank Robbery**

***Book Three:* The Pony Express Rides Again**

Book Four: Kidnapped

Book Five: *Mystery of the Crimson Bandit*

Book Six: Mystery of the Baffling Stagecoach Robberies

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BACKGROUND

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. Billy the Kid was a few months from the end of his short career as an outlaw. 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 medium 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.

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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 Book Two (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.

Johnny decides to research the fate of Pony Express Rider who disappeared twenty years before on a ride from the Nebraska border to Red Bend. He cared for a badly wounded boy who was a few years older than he, but who was also an orphan. They become close friends and work together to solve the mystery. Together they fought through a blizzard, discovered a secluded cave, and Johnny put himself in terrible danger as he attempted to get one of the bad guys to

incriminate himself. His new friend, Jericho (Jerry) went to live with and work for the owner of the livery stable.

CHAPTER ONE

The last hints of winter's snows could only be seen in the deepest shadows of the hills and gullies. Spring was on its way. The trees, though not yet greening, presented a shiny jacket as if sprucing themselves up in preparation for the wonders of Nature about to burst forth on every branch and twig of their beings. The mere contemplation of spring lifted Johnny's spirits.

As if that weren't enough, something else was in the works, which he thought would make the week just ahead the very best he'd had since arriving in Red Bend nine months earlier. His friend, Abbot – known as Jimmy since moving to Garden City to live with his recently discovered mother and grandmother – was coming to visit. He and his horse, Montague, would arrive by train at noon and stay for the entire week – longer if that seemed like a good idea.

So, it was that at ten o'clock that morning Johnny pulled up on Diablo at the livery stable in town in search of his even newer friend, Jericho – who, by then, was known as Jerry, to the folks in Red Bend. Jerry, with his fantastic knowledge of horses was employed at the Livery Stable. The job had been set up as temporary, just until Harry Carter, the owner, recovered from a heart attack, but the two of them had grown very close – like grandfather and grandson – and Johnny was betting the job was Jerry's for as long as he wanted or needed it. He lived in a room upstairs at the rear of the building and to him it seemed like a palace.

He found Jerry cleaning stalls in the large main room. There were double doors at each end and stalls, front to back,

along both sides. The nearly constant breeze from end to end helped it smell less like, well, like a livery stable. Hay and straw were stored in a loft at the front making it easy to drop it as needed onto the hard-packed dirt floor below. Oats arrived by the barrel and sat on the floor near the front. Johnny picked up a rake and went to join his friend.

“You haven’t forgotten what today is, have you?” he asked as he began working beside Jerry.

“Monday, you mean,” he said teasing.

Johnny understood and went on as if he had answered correctly.

“We need to leave by eleven. The westbound is never early, but often late. It will give us time for a leisurely trip down to the railhead south of town.”

“Leisurely – that must mean unhurried from the way you used it.”

Jerry, two years older than Johnny, came from a disadvantaged life – his father, a full-blooded Pawnee Indian and his mother the daughter of a rich rancher – had both died and he had survived by working at a ranch in Texas for food and a place to sleep. There had been no formal education in his background, although when it came to smarts about the natural world and horses he stood out at the top of the class. Johnny had helped him learn to read and Doc and Cilla (short for Pricilla, the newspaper editor) had included him to share in the plan they had created for Johnny’s high school studies.

“Unhurried is the perfect description of Leisurely. Your vocabulary is increasing at such a fast pace, I’m soon going to have to study the dictionary at night just to keep coming up with new words for you.”

They shared a smile.

“I never made it to the railhead south of town, you remember. That attack by the coyote sort of finished my part in the cattle drive. I’m eager to get a look at it. You’ve described it as having corrals as big as city blocks and a siding track a half mile long filled with cattle cars. I’ve never seen such a place.”

He suddenly turned serious.

“Are you sure you want me along? I mean, this Abbot kid is your old friend. I’m going to feel like an intruder – is that

the right word?"

"It's the right word, if you mean unwanted pest, but since you won't be, no it is the wrong word. You and he are my best friends. I want the three of us to become best friends – the three amigos."

"Tell me about him, then."

They continued to work the stalls getting them clean for new occupants.

"He got separated from his family when he was five, lived with a tribe of Gypsies for nine years before he reunited with his mother a month or so before you came to town. Like you, he's a whole lot smarter than he thought he was."

"Ah! The tres amigos inteligentes [three intelligent friends], you're saying. Sometimes my Spanish is better than my English."

"In either language, I believe we understand each other."

Johnny helped finish up the chores and they were on the trail south at exactly eleven o'clock. The two of them never seemed to run out of things to talk about and the hour passed quickly.

They stopped at the top of the final low rise where they could look out over the scene that stretched on in front of them – the railroad, the station building, the corrals, and the endless prairie that appeared to go on south forever.

"Texas is down there somewhere, I guess," Jerry said, really asking.

"A long way down there. Have to cross the southern half of Kansas and all of the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma, it became a state in 1907 – 27 years later) before you get to Texas."

Johnny dismounted.

"From up here we can see the train coming in from the west way before we could down at the track. I like to look for the first puffs of black smoke out there on the western horizon. You can see the smoke before you can hear the train."

"And that's because light travels faster than sound, right?" Jerry asked.

Johnny nodded and asked:

"You been snooping in some of Doc's science books

again?”

“Every evening for a couple of weeks. It’s all so new to me. I love it.”

Jerry nodded and joined him on the ground. They led the horses toward a small stand of young trees and bellied down in the grass, eyes searching westward.

Before long the black puffs appeared as tiny dots in the distance. They spied them at the same instant. It was worth a laugh as they raised their hands to point as if by plan.

“Four minutes,” Johnny said. “We have time to walk the horses down to the station. We can water them there.”

Jerry had very little experience with trains and was surprised at how much noise that one made. He covered his ears as it drew close and stepped back as the huge, long, black, steel engine jerked to a stop on the track. Steam spewed from tubes near the massive wheels kicking up dust and sending overly inquisitive dogs on their ways, yelping.

In addition to the engine and the coal car which attached to it, there were only four other cars: the dark green passenger car, followed by a brown mail car, an open car which carried crates and several horses, and at the rear, the red Caboose. An arm from the water tower was swung into place over the engine and filled its boiler with a supply of water – needed to make the steam that powered the engine.

A man and woman exited the passenger car before Abbot – Jimmy – appeared.

He paused on the middle step to survey the area, breaking a broad smile when he spotted Johnny who was waving his hat and moving in his direction. The meeting presented an unexpected awkward moment. Men didn’t hug in places like that and they were friends – not strangers who would shake hands. They settled for a hand on each other’s shoulders.

“Great to see you, Abbot/Jimmy. I want you to meet my new friend, Jericho/Jerry.”

They laughed at his odd phrasing.

At that, Jimmy offered his hand for a shake with his new acquaintance. That seemed to work fine between them.

“Call me whatever you want to. I’m strictly Jimmy to mom, and James to grandmother. I can easily handle Abbot

from you two.”

“I guess we’ll see what the old brain decides,” Johnny said. “Let’s get Montague off the flat car.”

Once back up the rise to the stand of trees, they stopped and broke out the lunch Aunt Bea had fixed for Johnny to take along. Montague and Diablo renewed old acquaintances. Pinto seemed happy to be included. By one o’clock it was back on the trail north along the creek.

Abbot and Johnny caught each other up on what had been going on in each of their lives. Johnny added details, which he felt would help the two boys grow comfortable with each other. They didn’t seem to run out of things to talk about, but then, boys seldom did when it was only boys and when they felt the need to talk, which was not constantly the way it seemed to be for girls. Adding girls to the mix often seemed to change that for some reason. Before they knew it they were entering Main Street, riding it side by side right down the middle.

“Doc and Cilla and the Marshal said to be sure and have you drop by to see them as soon as you got to town, Abbot,” Johnny said.

“I better go check on Harry,” Jerry said. “If things are all alright I’ll catch up with you somewhere.”

Johnny smiled to himself: Of course he would catch up with them somewhere. He couldn’t catch up with them nowhere! He didn’t mention it out loud.

Abbot turned into the livery stable and the other two moved on down the street and tied up in front of the Marshal’s office. The anticipated happy reunion inside was not to occur.

“Got bad news I’m afraid,” the Marshal said, settling for a nod in Abbot’s direction.

“What’s up?” Johnny asked.

The Marshal handed him a small piece of paper. There was a message hand printed on it.

Banker wife and Johnny aunt back when \$10,000 in saddle bag of mule under Sunday creek bridge. Untie and do not follow or harm will happen.

“Well, not from a college graduate for sure,” Johnny began. “Lacks articles and possessives. Spelling is fine. I’m assuming you already checked out at our place and Aunt Bea

was not there.”

“Sent a deputy right away. Horse and buggy are still in the stable. Something burned to a crisp in her oven. The same for the Banker’s wife (gone, not burned to a crisp!). Mr. Yeager saw her at eight this morning. When we checked, she was gone as well. We found the note wedged into the office door here about noon.”

Abbot spoke.

“Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money. Nobody has that much, do they?”

[That would be about three hundred thousand dollars in today’s currency.]

Johnny and the Marshal exchanged glances. He was one of the few people who knew about the huge sum of money Johnny had acquired during the first month he had been in Red Bend. He would be able to pay that ransom many times over. It raised the question about how some outsider might have come by that information.

“I’m thinking the kidnaper is counting on the Banker to be able to raise the money,” the Marshal said. “I still don’t have any idea why you and your Aunt are involved.”

“You have a plan, Marshal?” Johnny asked.

“Not really had time enough to think it through. Feel free to add any ideas that come to mind.”

“Well, first of all, we won’t pay the ransom, right?” Johnny said. “Such atrocious (terrible) behavior by despicable (terrible) people can’t be rewarded.”

“That’s the sticky question, I guess,” the Marshal said. “This is the first kidnapping and ransom I’ve ever been a part of. Yeager, at the bank, is already at work trying to raise the money. Knowing about somebody else’s financial resources – the way he does – he will probably expect some help.”

Johnny understood that somebody was him. He could see there might be a problem ahead – a difference of opinion about how to proceed, at least. On the one hand, he felt he owed Mr. Yeager a good deal for the way he had helped him make the necessary arrangements to handle his money and his willingness to keep the secret about it. On the other hand, he had almost single handedly caught the thief who, at the time, was well on his way to making off with every red cent in

the bank a few months before, so he figured the banker owed him as well.

The conversation became awkward with Abbot present. Johnny figured how to fix that.

“Abbot, would you go tell Jerry what’s happened?”

“Sure. How about Doc and Cilla?”

“That would be a big help,” the Marshal added, immediately understanding what Johnny was up to – buying some private time between them.

Abbot moved to the door.

“By the way it’s really good to see you again,” the Marshal called after him.

Abbot turned and offered a brief, weak smile and the hint of a nod, and left.

Johnny went on laying out the first thoughts he had about the situation.

“If the kidnapper knows I have money then it’s a pretty straight forward arrangement. Two rich guys each divvy up some cash and pay the ransom. But, if he doesn’t know about my money – and the care we’ve taken to guard that I have to think he doesn’t – then we need to look for something else that connects Mr. Yeager, Mrs. Yeager, Aunt Bea, and me.”

“And probably some or all of you with the kidnapper,” the Marshal added.

“Good catch,” Johnny said. He then continued thinking out loud. “Aunt Bea has a ranch. It’s small but with its location close to town and with access to water on both the east and west, it’s worth a lot of money. She and I both have accounts at the bank. I kept the bank from getting robbed. Aunt Bea grew up with the Yeagers. I can’t imagine that Aunt Bea ever did anybody so wrong that they’d want to take revenge on her. If they are after her stuff, I’d think they’d have taken me not her. What about enemies Mr. Yeager may have made?”

“I suppose he’s turned down some folks for loans in the past,” the Marshal began. “He always works with folks when they come upon hard times. I’ve never known him to foreclose on a piece of property. I’m thinking it’s about you and him – if it’s not about your money – and I’m not ruling that out at this point. Abbot or Jerry know about your money?”

“If they do they didn’t find out from me.”

“Who really does know about it?”

Johnny began counting on his fingers as he listed people.

“You, Doc, Cilla, Mr. Yeager at the local bank, the banker in Kansas City and my lawyer in Kansas City. I count only six – well, plus Aunt Bea and me. Kansas City seems like a long way away for somebody to cook up something like this even if a worker in my Lawyer’s office or at that big bank has learned about it.”

“I guess I agree about that. Not sure where it leaves us.”

“Could be as simple as having added Aunt Bea to the mix because that left the poor orphan boy without anybody,” Johnny said reaching for something. “May have thought that would generate sympathy among the townspeople and help the banker raise whatever money he couldn’t come up with by himself.”

Cilla entered and immediately went to Johnny and administered a hug.

“I’m so sorry for you. If you need a place to stay you know my couch is always available.”

“Haven’t thought that far ahead, but thanks. Good to know. You got any ideas about this thing?”

“Only thing that comes to mind has to do with your recent solving of the Pony Express rider’s death – Luke or Weatherly. Somebody connected with one or both of them trying to get back at you through your Aunt. They might have added the banker’s wife just to make sure there was enough money available to meet their demand. The biggest part of it would be the anguish it puts you through to have your Aunt missing.”

“An interesting twist, for sure,” Johnny said. “The Marshal and I weren’t there yet.”

Doc arrived.

“You doing alright,” he asked walking up to Johnny.

“Not really. Aunt Bea is my only blood relative in the whole world. To think I might have somehow put her in this dreadful situation bothers me a great deal. You got any ideas?”

“I was thinking about that snake oil salesman – what

was his name – Dr. Fantastic?”

“Fantasmo,” Johnny said supplying the name. [Book 2] “Sure seems like I’ve made a lot of enemies in the short time I’ve been here in Red Bend. Not sure what that says about me.”

“When your enemies are all bad guys, a man’s doing pretty well, I always figured,” the Marshal said.

The others nodded, everybody feeling all quite helpless at that point.

Abbot and Jerry entered, winded.

“Hey, like old home week in here,” Abbot said looking from face to face. “Anything new?”

The Marshal shook his head. Johnny offered a response.

“We’ve worked up some possibilities, but none of them stand out enough to put it at the top of the list. Can somebody tell me about the Sunday Creek Bridge?”

Cilla answered.

“It’s a fallen down bridge north west of town about three miles from here on Sunday Creek. Used to be heavily traveled back with the Sunday Creek Mill was operating. The mill still stands a half mile upstream from the bridge. Went out of business years ago. Mostly farms up there now. Used to be in wheat, thus the mill. A man with money came in and bought up the land with the idea of ranching it. He let it go back to grass. He died and his widow sold it off in smaller portions to the farmers. The folks up that way trade mostly over at Great Bend instead of coming this way. There’s an old mine up there that produced a little zinc and even less silver. Not much else.”

“Any ideas why that spot would be selected as the place to take the ransom money – under that particular bridge, I mean?”

The others shrugged their shoulders.

“It sounds like it’s away from Red Bend, but not too far away,” Abbot offered. “An easy ride up there and back to deliver the money.”

“You think they’re just leaving the poor old mule out there waiting?” Jerry asked, clear compassion for the animal in his tone.

“I suppose we could ride up and check it out,” Johnny said.

“He or they will very likely be watching it,” the Marshal said.

“So, we’ll make sure we aren’t seen. I’m sure we’d all feel better if we knew what was going on up there.”

“Check in back here by five or I’ll send deputies out looking for you and lock up your reins.”

It came out humorously even though the Marshal had not intended it that way

The boys left and stopped at the livery stable so Jerry could pick up Pinto. The three were quickly on their way north east out of town. They found themselves riding at an easy gallop – it hadn’t been planned, but reflected the urgency they all felt. Jerry and Abbot both felt a special tie with Johnny’s Aunt Bea and, of course, with Johnny who – despite his brave face – they knew was hurting in the worst way.

“I wish we knew where we were going,” Johnny said. “If we could just find that creek we could follow it.”

“If you want to find the creek that shouldn’t be hard at all,” Jerry said. “Just slow the horses to a walk and give them their head to go wherever they want. Horses will usually head toward water – they smell it in the air.”

They slowed and let up on the reins. Pinto turned first; the others followed. Within five minutes they were at the creek.

“Now if this is only Sunday Creek I guess we’re on the right track,” Johnny said.

“I only guaranteed a creek – not which one,” Jerry said smiling.

“Are there many creeks in this area?” Abbot asked.

“Counting this one – that I only today learned about – there are only four within fifty miles of Red Bend – the Red Rock and Willow that bound my Aunt’s ranch, and the Ottawa that runs south to Sandy Ford and the railhead are the others.”

“I would say we are getting close to being three miles from town,” Jerry said.

“Then let’s leave the horses and stick close to the woods over there to the right (east),” Johnny suggested.

They led the horses a few yards into the woods and

tied them on a long rope tether so they could graze and move around – Jerry’s idea, of course.

The boys moved north, keeping the edge of the creek to the west in view. Within minutes they had what remained of the top of the bridge in sight. There was little left of it except rotting beams and planks. It had spanned a rise through which the creek had cut its way as it flowed south towards them. They couldn’t see clear down to the bank of the creek below it.

“So, if somebody’s watching the mule, where would they be?” Abbot asked looking around.

“Just far enough away so they could watch the area, but not so far away that they couldn’t keep up with the mule after it was cut loose,” Jerry said, thinking out loud.

“Or, he is counting on the mule making its way back home on its own – to somewhere familiar like a farm, I guess, since that’s all there seems to be around here,” Johnny said.

The boys scanned the area and at the same moment pointed to a rock outcropping atop the highest of the low hills in the area.

Abbot pointed west.

“If we stay low and follow the bottom of that rise that runs just this side of the creek, I don’t think we could be seen from that outcropping.”

The others looked it over and agreed. Out of habit Johnny took the lead.

After about twenty-five yards they had the area under the bridge in sight. There was a mule on a long tether within easy reach of both water and a well-supplied feed trough. The animal was there for the long haul – could remain several weeks if necessary and never be approached by a caretaker.

“Pretty clever,” Johnny said as they all sat back against the rise to think through what they had discovered.

“I don’t see any way to get a good view of who might be up on the rocks,” Abbot said.

“And,” Johnny continued, “for all we know it may be some kid hired to keep a look out and it’s likely that he doesn’t even know who he’s working for. So, it probably isn’t going to help to get to him. What do you think?”

The other two nodded. Johnny pointed back the way

they'd come and they had soon returned to the woods with their horses.

"Anything left to do here?" Johnny asked.

"Can't see what," Abbot said.

Jerry agreed.

On the way back to town, they spoke about the logical next step – finding places that held good promise of being where the women were being held.

"If the kidnapper is smart he would have moved them a long way away from here to enlarge the search area," Jerry said.

"There could not have been much time from when they were abducted and when the note was dropped off at the Marshal's," Johnny said. "Aunt Bea was fine when I left her a little before ten. That was her apple straddle they found burnt in her oven, by the way. A very sad passing. The note was found at noon. As many people as are in and out of the Marshal's office, it couldn't have been there more than a few minutes."

"It sounds to me like more than one person is involved," Abbot said. "At least one to hold the women and one to drop off the note."

"The banker's wife is pretty frail," Johnny said. "One man – or woman – could have easily abducted her, although they live up on Maple Street and there are lots of houses up there. Hard to think they wouldn't have been seen late in the morning that way. My aunt, however, would have put up a struggle if she had the opportunity. I'm thinking it had to be at gun point. She wouldn't have just gone willingly."

"Would she have left a clue for you at your place?" Jerry asked.

"A great idea! You can bet she would have if she had a chance. We should check it out."

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to stay out at your place tonight," Jerry said as they turned east across the prairie. "They got Bea, but it could be they really wanted you – or both of you, you know."

"I certainly had not thought of that. Can you make room for Abbot and me in your place tonight?"

"Of course. My place is huge, you know that, but what

about Bea's horse?"

"She has water and oats in the stable. She'll be lonely for Diablo, but she's pretty much grown up alone in there – a lot more years by herself than with company. You see any reason she shouldn't be alright?"

"I guess not."

"We don't have a plan. We need a plan," Johnny said.

They continued cross country and soon saw the Red Rock Hills in the distance there on the north edge of Bea's ranch.

"With three of us we should be safe," Johnny said. "We have the three fastest horses in the area. You two can keep lookout and I'll go inside and see if I can find anything that may provide a clue of some kind."

With the search of the house complete, and making sure her horse was alright, they set a good gallop back to town.

They reported in with the Marshal. Johnny did the talking.

"Found the Mule. Set up for a couple of weeks with food. We think we found the place the bad guy is watching from – a rock outcropping on a rise about 100 yards east of the bridge. Figure it's probably a nobody up there who wouldn't know anything even if we caught him. Can we see the note again?"

Jerry smiled. "He means may we see the note again?"

It was worth a chuckle between the two. Abbot and the Marshal shrugged at each other figuring it had been a private thing between them.

The Marshal spread it out on the corner of his desk. They boys drew in close to look it over. Abbot pointed.

"Romani?"

"Ro-whaty?" Johnny asked.

"See the tiny 'v' over the 's' in saddle and Sunday. That's how they are written in Romani – the language of the Gypsies."

"Oh, my! I think that may have just pointed us in a useful direction – one of the Gypsies trying to obtain the money I kept them from getting when I interrupted the bank robbery they had planned."

“I just think you may be right,” the Marshal said.

“And there is more from back at the house,” Johnny went on. “I couldn’t understand it at the time I found it, but there was this necklace – a glass bead necklace on the floor beside the front door.”

He removed it from his pocket.

“We keep several from the carnival on a nail beside the door – don’t know why we do that but we do.”

He pulled it out of his pocket.

“That’s the kind that are given as prizes at the carnival booths by the Gypsies,” Abbot added.

“It means something more than that,” Johnny said. “Aunt Bea had to have recognized that the person or people who took her were Gypsies. Could have been the way they dressed, I suppose, or it could be she actually recognized one of them. She was in town a lot during the carnival week. We need to think who she would have known well enough to recognize.”

Abbot had one more caution:

“We must be very careful. A few of the men can be ruthless. If they think Johnny was the one who got in the way of the robbery at the bank, they will probably not only try to get the money they have asked for, but they will certainly try to get Johnny as well.”

CHAPTER TWO

Suspecting that the plan had been for Bea to feed the boys while Abbot was there, Doc and Cilla took the three of them to the restaurant for supper. A plan was being formulated – being spun might be a more appropriate way to phrase it since it involved constructing a web for the purpose of catching the bad guy.

Doc and Cilla listened as the boys grew their plan. They would offer cautions if and when they felt they were necessary.

“I don’t see how you can possibly raise all that money,” Jerry said.

“We’re not going to pay the kidnapper a single cent, so stop clogging up your brain with that,” Johnny said. “We need it free to be creative.”

Jerry clearly didn’t understand, but he would do his best to put it out of his mind.

“Here’s a first draft of a plan,” Johnny began. “What if we write a note asking for proof they really have the two women? That would have to seem reasonable to the kidnapper, wouldn’t it?”

“Probably, but like what could they offer as proof?” Jerry asked.

“We’ll leave that up to them. It will catch them off balance and tamper with their thinking and their plan. They’ll see it can’t be as simple as they thought it would be.”

“Makes sense,” Abbot said. Jerry nodded. Doc and Cilla squirmed in their chairs just a bit, but didn’t object.

“How do we get the note to the kidnapper?” Jerry

asked. “We don’t know where he is or we’d just go get the women.”

“Here’s one thought,” Johnny said. “We put the note in a package that will look large enough to contain the money. I’ll take it to the creek, put it in the mule’s saddle bags, and leave. Then we’ll follow the mule, find the women and capture the bad guy or guys.”

Doc raised his eyebrows in Cilla’s direction. He felt the need to make a few points.

“First, the note was given to the Marshal so the ‘bad guy’, as you call him, will be expecting the Marshal to deliver the money. Second, if the bad guy is watching or having the mule watched he will know you are following him and you will be putting yourselves in danger. Third, he’s not going to be a happy camper when he finds the note instead of the money.”

The boys grew silent; Abbot and Jerry turned to look at Johnny who spoke.

“Three good points. So, we let the Marshal make the delivery. He’ll make it at sundown so when we follow the mule we can stick to the darkness and not be seen. We will make the note sound like we are willing to go along with what he’s asking for so he won’t be quite so put out with us.”

Doc looked at Cilla.

“That would seem to handle the problems I proposed. What do you think?”

“It all comes down to the mental state of the bad guy, I suppose. If he is unsure of the plan, then he’s going to react one way. If he’s very confident, then another way. Just not sure which will be which – whether he’ll trust what we say or not.”

“We could give him a small down payment, circulate the serial numbers of the bills to all the local stores and banks and wait to see if he spends any of it,” Abbot said remembering how the Red Bend bank robbers had been caught.

“If we’re dealing with the same group, they’d be pretty dumb to spend the money around here, Johnny said. “So, Plan A, then, guys?”

The boys nodded immediately. Doc and Cilla shrugged not vetoing it but certainly not endorsing it. The Marshal entered and came directly to their table. Jerry got him a chair

and he took a seat. Johnny shared Plan A.

“It might work – at least it might buy us some time. Yeager says it will take at least a week to get that amount of cash delivered from Denver. The most he can scrape up from around here is about a thousand dollars.”

“Abbot suggested we keep track of the serial numbers again in case we find a way to use them,” Johnny said.

The Marshal nodded and said:

“Better get to work on that note – that’s the five of you, understand. Bring it by the office when you have it. I’ll talk to Mr. Yeager and see how large a bundle all those bills would be and work on putting together a phony package.”

He left and the others got to work. Cilla always carried paper and pencils. After a half hour, they had agreed on the following:

“We believe Mrs. Yeager and Bea Baker left town together to visit friends in Great Bend. You will need to prove to us that you really have them. Send us something from each of them that we will recognize. Put them in the mule’s saddle bag and return it to the bridge. Just in case you can convince us, we are working on gathering the money. Have to have most of it brought in from out of town.”

Cilla hand printed the note and the boys delivered it to the Marshal. He had stuffed two flour bags with rags so they would approximate the correct size – in case the bad guys actually knew what size to expect.

At six o’clock the Marshal set out north east with the bags. The boys circled west, crossing the river well south and keeping to the deep shadows as they worked their way north. They chose to be across the river because that’s where the mule was tied up. They figured it had been placed over there so it wouldn’t have to cross the creek to get back home once it was untied. They were in place when the Marshal rode up to where the mule stood. He dismounted, transferred the bags, and untied the mule. Then he remounted, and left, heading south at a good gallop. It was his plan to re-cross the creek to the west a mile south and join up with the boys.

The mule seemed more than ready to leave. Johnny didn’t understand so asked Jerry in a whisper.

“I don’t get it. The mule had plenty to eat down there.

Why would it give all that up and leave for home?"

"I imagine that although there was lots of food provided to keep it alive and well, it was not the kind of food the mule liked best – the kind it is used to eating at where ever home is."

Johnny turned to Abbot:

"Now are you beginning to see why I keep this skinny kid around?"

It was worth chuckles.

Johnny and Abbot had worn dark clothes with long sleeves to cover their light skin. (What Johnny had thought was Abbot's dark skin when he first met him, washed away during his first bath.) Jerry, needed no such camouflage. His beautiful natural, Pawnee tan blended in well to the darkening world.

"The mule will walk slowly so it will be best if we walk and lead our horses," Jerry suggested.

They followed his lead. Mules have a good sense of direction and set a course that appeared to be fairly straight and direct to somewhere. They trailed it by no more than thirty yards. It probably knew they were there, but had no reason to be spooked by their presence. Jerry figured that was because it was used to being treated well by the people around it.

Fifteen minutes later, the trail appeared to end in the shadows at the bottom of a rocky rise. The mule disappeared from sight. They hurried on after it. In its place, they found what Johnny believed was the entrance to the mine Cilla had spoken about. They had not brought lanterns. Abbot had several candles, but they would not burn for long.

"How many you have?" Johnny asked.

"Six."

"Alright, then. We can go in as far as three candles will take us. That will leave us three to get back to the entrance."

The others privately thought that had been very good thinking, but no mention was made of it. They tethered the horses just inside the entrance where they would be out of sight. The first candle was lit and they moved into the shaft.

It was only about five feet tall so they all found themselves stooping as they walked. It varied in width from

four to eight feet – probably dependent on the amount of mineral deposit that had been found and dug out. The floor was wet and slippery. The air was dank (clammy, really humid) and the ceiling dripped water from the ground above.

“You know guys,” Abbot said, “if a bad guy wanted to do in three snooping boys this would be a really good place to do it.”

“You can stay with the horses and be our lookout if you’d feel better about things that way,” Johnny said in all seriousness.

“Oh, no. If I’m going to be done in I want to be done in with you two and not by myself.”

“Sometimes you have a very strange head,” Johnny said.

“And that coming from the King of Strange Heads,” Abbot replied.

There were smiles into the darkness.

Abbot had taken the lead since he had the candles stuffed into his pockets. He put up his hand signaling for the others to stop.

“Listen to see if we can hear the mule.”

They could – faintly, but a rhythmic clip, clop, trailed back from in front of them. There was a good deal of fallen rock on the floor, which slowed them down. Jerry doubted if it would slow the sure-footed mule that somehow knew the route so well it didn’t even need light.

In the end, they had not even used one full candle. It was a short tunnel that came out on the other side of the rise. One problem. There was no mule in sight anywhere. They looked at each other, all of them clearly puzzled.

“Could we have missed a side tunnel?” Abbot asked.

It made sense to them and they returned inside taking special notice of the walls. The fact was they came upon several – just narrow slits no more than a yard wide and cut at angles in the direction from which they had come; that had worked to hide them from view.

“Any ideas, fellas?” Johnny asked, blowing out the candle since light wasn’t needed for them to discuss the problem.

“I’m thinking that since we kept hearing the mule’s

hooves all the way to the end that it took one of the very last side tunnels,” Jerry said. “I hadn’t even considered it could go anywhere so I probably wasn’t paying close enough attention to the sounds.”

“I believe we were all taken in by that, pal,” Johnny said. “Shall we try that last one – the first one we found when we started back through the tunnel from the other side?”

“We’re here. Why not,” Abbot said.

They re-lit the candle and had soon found the opening. It was not as tall or wide as the main tunnel. Just inside they stopped to listen. They could hear nothing, but really didn’t expect to since so much time had elapsed. They continued until the first candle had just about been spent.

“Well this isn’t helpful,” Jerry said holding the candle high so the others could see what lay just ahead – the tunnel ended against a rock wall. There was no opening.

He lit the second candle and they returned to the main tunnel. The next opening was virtually the same height as the first, but twice as wide. Apparently, it had held more ore – whatever that may have been. They followed it to the end as well – three quarters of a candle. At least that time they came to an opening.

Jerry blew out the candle so if anybody was watching they would not see the light. The moon had come out from behind the clouds that had earlier kept the world very dark. There was a trail that continued down the hill from the opening. It was overgrown but it was a trail. Abbot knelt to examine it.

“Look. Two main ruts about three feet apart. Really old but you can still see them. A trail for wagons, I think. Probably took the broken-up pieces of rock out at this opening to someplace where they did whatever you do to rocks from a mine.”

Since none of the others knew any more than had been displayed in Jerry’s statement, they had nothing to add.

“Let’s at least see where the trail leads,” Johnny said. “I’m willing to bet the mule came this way. I remember reading a story about mules that worked coal mines up in Minnesota and they spent so much time underground they lost their sight, but could still make their way around the tunnels

with no difficulty.”

“My father said that in many ways mules are the smartest of their kind – them and donkeys and horses,” Jerry said. “And they can carry heavy loads and have great endurance. He used to joke that a mule only had one speed, but it could keep it up for days if you didn’t try to hurry it.”

They made their way down the slope to the wide, flat valley below. They had seen lights from up on the hillside suggesting at least two farm houses within a mile or so. There was no way of knowing to which, if either, of them the mule had headed.

Johnny turned to the others.

“So, how does it feel to be outsmarted by a mule?”

Abbot smiled.

“Why don’t you tell us?”

Johnny understood. He was right. They had been in it together.

“I’m suggesting we go around the hill instead of going back through the mine,” Jerry said.

The others readily agreed.

The horses were waiting. That probably confirmed Johnny’s feeling that they had not been followed. He opened one of his saddle bags and tossed an apple to each of his friends. They munched as they began the ride back to Red Bend.

The horses startled – rearing and whinnying in uncharacteristic ways. Jerry suspected a rattle snake. Abbot figured they were hungry and tired – he knew he was. Johnny was afraid the bad guy was much closer than he’d like him to be.

A voice came out of the darkness just ahead. They boys stopped breathing.

“Where you youngsters been to? I’ve searched the whole area. Worried sick.”

It was the Marshal. Johnny, knowing him the best, recognized the voice immediately and he spoke to reassure his friends.

“Marshal. Aren’t you supposed to be back protecting the good citizens of Red Bend?”

“I’m of a mind they’re doing better than you three.

What's up?"

Johnny gave the explanation. Each of the others added things they thought were important as the story unfolded.

"Sorry. We lost track of time," Johnny managed, in a last-ditch effort to soothe the Marshal.

They were soon all headed south along the creek.

"I guess we just wait to see if we get a response in the mule's saddle bags," Johnny said. "We will need to be back out here tomorrow to wait for its return."

"It will need to be a deputy and not you," the Marshal said. "If the kidnapper doesn't take well to the contents of the note there could be trouble."

"Fine," Johnny said. "A deputy and 'we' will be back out here tomorrow to wait for it to return."

The boys rode directly to the livery stable where they took care of their horses – always the first responsibility in those days. Harry, the owner, stuck his head out of the office.

"Cilla left supper for you up in Jerry's room. Hope that's alright I let her go up there."

"A new rule, Harry," Jerry said. "Anybody bringing food is welcome to go up to my room any time."

It always gave Jerry a special feeling when he referred to it as 'my room'. Johnny understood. He was certain Abbot did, also.

"You threw hay down from the loft, Harry," Jerry said. "You know you shouldn't have done that. Do I have to tell Doc on you again?"

"Again?" Johnny asked intrigued by the term.

"He's a regular tattle tale," Harry said. "One little shot of whiskey or one little cigar and off he goes to get Doc."

"Clearly, you're important to him, Harry. I wouldn't complain. There's just about nothing in life that's better than being important to somebody."

Nothing else needed to be said and the boys clamored up the narrow stairs to the loft. Johnny hadn't been there for a month or more. Several things had changed. Jerry had become a scavenger (search out and collect). He had added a mattress on the floor to replace his sleeping bag. There was a small round table with two chairs. He had cobbled together

a bookcase that held just four books – it was big enough for a hundred.

“Figuring on expanding your library I imagine,” Johnny said thinking he was making a joke.

“Oh, yes. I save twenty-five cents every week for books I want. I’m not going to buy copies of what you or Doc or Cilla already have. When I get new ones they will be for you to read as well.”

“Very good plan. What’s this?”

Johnny pointed to a scrapbook.

“It is my ‘Johnny Book’. Every time you publish one of your stories in Cilla’s paper I will cut it out and paste it in there.”

He turned to Abbot.

“Did you know Johnny’s already had one of his stories published – a four-part serial about the Pony Express?”

“No. Nice going. I will make sure to read it before I leave.”

“I’m glad you can read,” Jerry said. “Johnny taught me and it’s the greatest thing ever.”

Abbot grinned.

“I thought girls were the greatest things ever.”

They took seats here and there around the room while devouring the meal.

Abbot proceeded to regale (entertain) the other two with the never-ending story of him and his new girlfriend down in Garden City. That grew into a discussion of the fairer gender in general and went on late into the night. (Sounds like a bunch of boys talking! Oh! It was!)

The day before had been a slow day at the livery so there were only a half dozen stalls to clean that next morning. The three of them made short work of it and they entered the restaurant at a little before seven. Doc was back at his table. They joined him. Johnny slipped Doc some money under the table. He would pay, but didn’t want that known. Doc understood.

They filled the old gentleman in on what had happened the night before (the time at the creek and the mine, not the discussion in the loft) and said they were about to get themselves back up there. They ordered breakfast and Doc

asked the waitress to have the cook prepare a good-sized lunch for the boys to take with them.

“I only have enough money for breakfast,” Abbot said.

“Oh. No. Meals this week won’t cost you anything,” Doc said. “Since you are assisting the Marshal, the Law Enforcement Fund will pay for them.”

He winked at Johnny and received the tiniest indication of a nod in return. Doc didn’t tell lies so Johnny figured he had just been instructed to think of his clandestine (secret) meal money as the newly established, Law Enforcement Fund. He could do that.

Abbot looked back and forth between Doc and Johnny. He knew something was up, but wouldn’t question his two good friends. Johnny hurried on to other things.

“So far, Plan A has hit a snag. I guess we’ll see if we get a response that we can work with before we give up on it. We probably should be thinking of Plan B, just in case, however.”

“I had a thought last night,” Abbot said. “Since it is two women who are being held I’m thinking there is probably a woman in on it – to watch over them and take care of their needs.”

“Probably a very good supposition (hunch),” Johnny said. “I hope that’s the case, anyway.”

After breakfast, they walked Doc to his office and then trotted on up the street to the livery. Jerry needed to make certain Harry was feeling well and could handle things there. Tuesdays were usually the lightest day of the week, but he asked anyway. He was assured things would be fine. The deputy rode up ready to accompany them. He spoke directly to Jerry.

“Marshal says he’ll have Billy (another deputy) check in up here with Harry a few times and help out if he’s needed.”

Jerry kept forgetting that his new world was just filled with nice and thoughtful people.

They were soon on their way, a huge lunch spread among the three sets of saddle bags.

“You can always tell when horses like each other – or don’t,” Jerry said. “Our three have hit it off really well. I’m happy about that.”

It didn't call for a response and neither boy tried to manufacture one.

"How we going to do this?" Abbot asked. "Somebody will have to lead the mule back – it's not going to go back on its own just to get bad food, like Jerry said."

"Marshal thinks it will already be there when we arrive," The deputy said. "I imagine he's right. Cal is usually right."

And he had been right. There it was standing perfectly still, tied to the long tether, just how it had been the day before. (If one could read a mule's mind they would have probably heard colorful comments about the food that would not have been fit for his mother to have heard.)

"The Marshal gave me an order that under no circumstances was I to let you sweet talk me into letting you go down there with the mule so don't try. You stay up here and I'll go see what's what."

He drew his revolver.

"You'll get no argument for us, deputy," Johnny said putting up his hands. "Don't shoot!"

"Oh, no, this ain't for. . ." He broke into a smile. "Cal said I'd have to watch my step with you. I'll be right back."

The four of them dismounted and Johnny took the reins from the deputy. Abbot sat and pulled at the grass. Jerry squatted and held a wheat look-alike weed in his mouth. Johnny stood and watched the deputy advance toward the mule.

Down at the creek he patted the animal and undid one saddle bag. Apparently, it was empty. He undid the other and removed a piece of paper. Johnny was puzzled and hoped it wasn't the note they had sent just being returned.

Without looking at it, the deputy re-buckled the saddle bag and climbed the rise back to the boys. The others stood up and moved close. The deputy handed it into Johnny's outstretched hand. Johnny scanned it quickly.

"This is really pretty clever. Instead of sending back stuff, he sent back private information. This is Aunt Bea's handwriting. I assume the other is Mr. Yeager's. Aunt Bea lists my birthdate, my father's birthdate and her birthdate. I have to say this is legitimate (genuine)."

"Of course, we thought it would be, right?" Jerry said.

“We were only trying to buy time and mess with the kidnapper’s timeline.”

“That’s right.”

Abbot pointed to the back of the sheet.

“What’s that?”

Johnny turned it over.

“Another note from the bad guy. Let’s see what it says.

The \$10,000 dollars has gone up to \$12,000. Do not send bills. We will only take silver dollars.

“Got several new things here guys,” Johnny said. “First, we can be sure they don’t know we tried to follow the mule last night or we’d have heard about it. Second, since they don’t want bills I’m betting they know about the way we used serial numbers to track them down after the bank robberies. Without putting any good thought into it he switched it to coins that can’t be traced. Third, he uses the term ‘we’ telling us – as we suspected – there is more than one person. Fourth, the bad guy doesn’t know much about American coins, which makes me think he’s not Gypsy Carnival, but maybe rodeo or the construction company.”

Johnny thought for just a moment.

“I happen to know that a Morgan silver dollar weighs 27 grams.”

“Of course, you do,” Jerry said kidding. “What thirteen-year-old frontier boy doesn’t know that?”

It drew smiles from the others. Johnny continued without disrupting his train of thought.

“Ten thousand of them would weigh 270,000 grams which is roughly 6,000 pounds and would occupy a space of over three cubic feet – three feet by three feet by three feet.”

“You did that in your head!” the deputy said amazed and puzzled. He had difficulty figuring change from a dollar for a twenty-five-cent purchase.

“My brain has a thing for figures. Can’t take any credit for it. Came into the world with me as original equipment. The question is, Jerry, what kind of a load in pounds can a mule carry?”

“Maybe 200 pounds over short distances like we’re talking here.”

“So, that would take 30 mules or 30 trips by one mule.

See what I mean. The guy is . . . I don't even know the word to describe him."

Jerry: "Stupid."

Abbot: "Ignorant."

Jerry: "Dumb."

Abbot: "Idiotic."

Jerry: "Daft."

Deputy: "I'm confused."

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CHAPTER THREE

“Alright! Alright! I get the message. There are words to describe him. It seems to set up an impossible situation for us, however. We could never send the kidnappers what they’re asking for using the one mule even if we could get 12,000 silver dollars in from the Denver mint. And, if we can’t deliver, the women are going to be harmed.”

“Only one thing left to do then,” Abbot said.

“We have to go find them,” Jerry added finishing the idea.

“That may take days,” Johnny said. “We need to buy still more time.”

He addressed the deputy.

“We need time to do some thinking, deputy. I’d like to go for a swim. I’ve always done some of my best thinking while swimming. You take the note back to the Marshal and tell him we’re working on Plan B. He’ll understand.”

With some reluctance, the deputy mounted up and headed back toward Red Bend. He glanced back at them several times before urging his mount into a gallop.

“Really? Go swimming when you Aunt’s life may be in danger,” Abbot said.

“Think, guys. I told the deputy I’d like to go for a swim. I would like to, so it’s not a lie, however, I just imagine you two very persuasive friends might be able to talk me out of it.”

“Don’t go for a swim,” Jerry said.

“Alright,” Johnny answered. “See, was that so hard?”

Three grins broke a once.

“So, what’s the plan?” Jerry asked.

“First, in order to buy that time we need, we have to communicate with the kidnappers again. I’ll write a note and we’ll send the mule on its way. There are two parts to this. First, the note, but second, you two will go on ahead to the mine and enter from the exit on around where we found the wagon trail. Go in and wait for the mule near the opening on this end of the main tunnel. That way you can see where it really goes. There were at least four side tunnels we didn’t even explore. This should speed up the process.”

“And while we are risking our lives in the mine you will be going for a swim?” Abbot said/asked.

Johnny raised his eyebrows, which said, ‘No’, which said, ‘Pay attention,’ which said, ‘Listen to me, now.’

“I’ll wait out those fifteen minutes hidden in the rocks over there, and see if anybody shows up to follow the mule.”

Johnny moved to his saddle bag and removed three whistles – like those he used to save Cilla’s newspaper soon after he arrived at Red Bend [Book One].

“These are for extreme emergencies only. If somebody follows the mule, I’ll follow him and blow mine three times when I get to the entrance. You two will run to the other side of the hill and leave before he can find you. We’ll meet 200 yards downstream from here whenever we can get there – in that stand of trees. If you get in trouble you do the same – three whistles. It’s like a kid’s version of the Marshal’s three shots in the air to signal an emergency.”

The boys slid the whistles into their front pants pockets and nodded their agreement with the plan.

Johnny removed a sheet of paper from his saddlebag and began thinking about what to say. He tried it out on the others before putting anything down.

“Understand about switch to silver dollars. That will take extra time to bring them in from Denver. Thank you for verifying the women you have with you. Will contact you before bringing money.”

The others thought it was perfect. It agreed to the type of payment, made the case for needing more time, acknowledged the identities of the captors, and reaffirmed they were agreeing to make the payment.

“How much head start will you need?” Johnny asked.

“Give us fifteen minutes,” Abbot said. “It will take the mule another fifteen to get to the mine. That will allow us plenty of time to get in place. Will you meet us inside?”

“If no problems arise with anybody following the mule. I’ll need to know where you’ve gone in there – where the mule’s gone. How about gathering some sticks and using them to point the way on the floor?”

They nodded. They had brought a lantern for each of them. Each lantern could burn for several hours so three of them would actually be overkill. The boys moved around the slope in such a way as to be out of the line of sight from the rocky outcropping on top of the hill where they had decided any lookout would be stationed. Johnny led the horses to the creek and arranged a generous tether so they could drink and graze and enjoy the sun or retreat into the shade.

Fifteen minutes passed. Johnny moved upstream the twenty yards to the mule and carefully inserted the note. The mule gave no response suggesting neither that it was happy nor unhappy to have a person nearby. Johnny untied it, ready to pat it on its behind and send it on its way. That was not necessary. Immediately, it turned and set its steady pace directly west across the wide expanse of grass along the base of the hill.

‘That food on the other end must be delicious!’ he thought to himself.

Johnny lay down, back against the rise on the west side of the creek so he could keep watch for anybody who might approach the area. He waited for fifteen minutes. No one put in an appearance so he took off on the trot toward the mine. The mule was nowhere in sight so he figured it had already entered the tunnel. He waited until he was well into the darkness inside before lighting his lantern.

Taking a lesson from Jerry the day before, he stopped and listened to see if he could hear the mule. He could not. He would have to depend on the clues from the other boys. He held the lantern low scanning the floor as he walked. If he had been forced to bet, he would have selected the side tunnel they had followed to the opening at the old wagon trail. It provided passage clear through the hill and probably on to

one of the farms beyond.

He would have been wrong.

No more than twenty-five yards into the main tunnel he saw the pointer on the floor. The opening was well hidden, again leaving at an angle heading back toward the north. He saw no light so figured the tunnel must curve or take a right or left turn ahead. That time he was correct.

The tunnel eventually came to a T – one branch going left and one right. The sticks pointed left. If his calculations were correct that meant he was heading southwest, parallel to the main tunnel. He made the turn and moved on for several minutes. Again, there was no light ahead to suggest that he was catching up with his friends. He paused again to see if he could hear anything. There were no sounds coming; what he heard was not good – the rumbling of falling rock.

With some caution, he turned around and moved back toward the sound. He was met by a rush of thick dust tumbling toward him through the tunnel. He moved his bandana from around his neck up to cover his mouth and nose. He squinted into the millions of particles of dust, which, by then were reflecting the light from his lantern making it impossible to see beyond it. He stopped and waited.

Presently, the rumbling ceased and the dust cloud settled. He retraced his path another ten yards toward the source of the sound. His worst fear was realized – the ceiling had collapsed. The tunnel was sealed – top to bottom and side to side. There was no way back.

Johnny understood the seriousness of the situation. If there were not an opening at the other end, he might well have just come face to face with what would become his tomb.

He had no way of knowing how thick the pile of rock might be and figured his best approach was to continue on the path his friends had indicated. He turned around and moved out in that direction. He lowered the flame in his lantern in case the supply of oxygen might become a factor later on.

Presently there was a dull, yellow glow ahead. Whether from lanterns or from the sun he could not determine. As he neared it he could see it came from around another 90 degree turn to the left – back toward the main tunnel. Exhibiting less caution than was reasonable, he rounded the

corner and was soon within a few yards of two familiar faces – well, three if you counted Mule.

“What’s up, guys?” he said lifting his lantern high to provide better light.

They approached him. Jerry spoke.

“Darndest thing. The tunnel stops right here. There is that small crack in the back wall that allows a little light to come in. We must be within inches of the outside. And look there! Food and water for the mule. We don’t get it.”

Johnny tried to restate the situation. In his experience, that usually helped him figure things out.

“So, we’ve followed the mule into a dead-end tunnel that has been furnished with food and water for the animal. That means somebody has to come in here the way we just did in order to find the mule and retrieve what he is carrying. This took some careful planning and no small amount of time to train the mule. We aren’t just dealing with some dummy who had a crazy, spur of the moment, get rich scheme.”

The others nodded. Jerry spoke.

“Did you hear that noise a while ago from back in the tunnel?”

“Yup! It was just behind me. You’re not going to like what I have to tell you about it. The ceiling of the tunnel caved in back there and completely blocked our way out.”

“Oh, oh!” Abbot said. “Now what?”

“First, I suggest we turn off the lanterns and save them for after dark if we still need them by then. Let’s see how much light actually comes in through that crack in the back wall.”

Once their eyes adjusted to the low level of illumination, they found they could actually see fairly well – well, well enough.

“Looks like we have two options,” Johnny said after a few minutes. “Either we find a way to shrink ourselves down so we can crawl thorough that crack, or we go back and move the rocks that are blocking the tunnel.”

“Or,” Jerry added, “we perish together right here in this terrible old mine.”

Abbot’s face lit up.

“Not ‘terrible’ mine’,” he said, “but the Terra Mine.”

[Terra (or something close to it) means 'land or earth' in several languages.]

"We're going to need lots more than that, pal," Johnny said twirling his finger to coax out more details.

"There was an old man in the Gypsy family that worked mostly with the construction crew – the crew we discovered really set up the bank robberies. He told stories about working in a mine – the Terra Mine – back when he was a young man. I remember he told stories of spending his earnings in a town he called Great Bend. That could be this mine."

"I see where you're going," Johnny said. "If he knew about this place then he could be the one behind all this or at least be a part of it – somebody has to know a whole lot about these tunnels. We foiled his plan to rob the bank in Red Bend and now he's using his knowledge of this mine where he used to work as a part of his plan to get back the money and maybe take revenge on me and the banker. Was that old man smart enough to pull off something like this?"

"He moved with the construction crew so I really didn't ever get to know him very well. How can I say this accurately? To me he appeared to be very intelligent, but also quite ignorant of things in general – does that make sense?"

"It makes perfect sense to me," Johnny said.

"To quote a recently departed deputy, 'I'm confused'," Jerry said.

"Remember, intelligence means how easy it is for a person to learn. Very intelligent people learn easily – rapidly. Not so intelligent people learn slower and have more difficulty learning new things. Very different from intelligence there is knowledge. Folks, regardless of how intelligent they are may not have taken time or had the opportunities to learn a lot of things about some subject; therefore, they are ignorant – uninformed – about the topic. See, an intelligent person can also be ignorant."

"Thank you. I should have known that," Jerry said.

"You mean an intelligent person like you should not have been ignorant about it?"

Jerry grinned and nodded. That particular intelligent boy would never be ignorant about ignorance again!

Abbot returned to thinking about the old gypsy man in

light of what Johnny had just said.

“I hadn’t thought it all the way through like that,” Abbot said, “but what you say makes complete sense. He was the go-between from the construction crew to Cappi, the owner of the Carnival and the Rodeo and the Construction Company. He struggled with English and, like you hinted at, he had no reason to know much about American coins – the family members didn’t need money – everything was provided.”

“Does the old man have a name?” Johnny asked. “That will make conversation easier.”

“Oh. Yes. Otto.”

“Alright – Otto. That’s a palindrome, you know,” Johnny said.

“A pala what?” Abbot asked.

“A palindrome – a word or phrase that is spelled the same frontwards as backwards, like ‘madam’ or ‘nurses run’. Not really important at this moment in your lives, I suppose.”

“Not a ton,” Jerry said.

“What?” Johnny asked fully confused by the response.

“Not a ton would be another example of a palindrome, right?”

“Can we stop with the word games and save our lives here?” Abbot said sounding disturbed.

“Sounds like you are really saying, Dammit, I’m mad?” Jerry said with a smile.

“No need to swear,” Johnny said.

“I wasn’t – really. That’s another palindrome – dammit, I’m mad.”

Johnny shook his head. Abbot pounded one palm with the other fist. Jerry figured it was time to shut up. Johnny moved to examine the crack, which let in the light.

“Rock looks to be no more than a foot thick here. I have to wonder why they just stopped excavating before breaking through.”

The others shrugged. Abbot managed a tentative, “Security, maybe?”

Johnny nodded thinking it was actually a pretty good idea.

“If we had a sledge hammer we could probably break through it,” Jerry said finally becoming serious about things.

“We could use stones but the stones on the ground here aren’t anywhere near large enough for that,” Johnny said, kicking at a few close by.

“How about those back at the tunnel collapse?” Abbot asked.

“They are for sure big enough,” Johnny said, experiencing a sense of hope for the first time, unlike the mule that had no reason not to think everything was going to be just fine. It took a long drink after having just enjoyed a large, red, apple.

Johnny lit a match. Abbot held up his lantern and they soon had it burning brightly. Johnny led the way to the cave-in.

“So, what will be the ideal size?” Jerry asked as they surveyed the pile.

“Small enough for us to lift fairly easily and slam against the wall, yet big enough to do some damage to it, I guess,” Abbot said.

With that in mind they tried some out and presently each selected one and began the return trip. After nearly a half hour of slamming stone against stone, Johnny set his big rock on the floor and used it for a seat.

“We’re getting nowhere. That wall must be made of iron ore or something. I think we just proved we won’t be able to budge it. Maybe that’s why the miners left it there – they couldn’t budge it either.”

The others joined him on their rocks. The three of them remained silent for some time, panting and exhausted.

“I’ll bet we are filthy,” Johnny said.

Abbot turned to Jerry.

“Now that sounds like the Johnny we’ve both grown to love and admire.”

Jerry chuckled.

“Did he make you take a bath when he first met you?”

“You, too, huh? I suppose we have to allow it – him growing up in a big fancy house in a big fancy city, like Cilla tells me he did.”

Johnny suddenly wondered what other of his secrets Cilla had blabbed about to them – his money, for example?

“Since the shrinking alternative is not realistic outside of

a story book, I guess we're left with dismantling that pile of rock back there," Johnny said.

"I'm thirsty," Abbot said.

"Water in the trough," Jerry said, pointing. "I'm sure mule will share."

"Yuk!"

"I guess you have a choice, then. Think 'yuk' or die of thirst."

Jerry leaned down and scooped up a drink in his hand. Johnny did the same although unlike Jerry, he shivered during the process. Eventually Abbot's thirst won out and he, too, drank his fill. (The mule didn't seem to care one way or the other.)

"Let's look and see what's here for the mule to eat?" Jerry asked. "It really could be pretty good stuff?"

Johnny and Abbot looked puzzled. Good stuff???

For the first time, they turned their attention to the feed bin and were quite surprised. Jerry explained.

"Mules have taste buds similar to humans and so they show preferences for certain foods. Hay and grass are usually at the bottom of their preference list – like what is available for this one at the creek. But look here, under the hay. Many a mule's favorites – apples, sugar cubes, carrots, raw yams, even some pears."

He rummaged through the offering and tossed an apple and a pear to each of the others.

"No wonder it always made tracks for here when it was freed," Jerry went on. "I probably would, too. Sugar cubes for dessert, if you are good boys," he joked.

They were hungry and ate without questioning the supply source. The mule continued to seem unconcerned about the pilfering (burglary). He had already eaten his fill.

Not quite so hungry anymore and a bit more rested, they arrived back at the point of the collapse. Abbot examined the irregular pile of stones that came in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. He had a comment.

"Probably, as we move rocks away from the base, more rocks will fall to take their places – at least for a while. The collapse seems to be well up into the ceiling. I guess we'll see."

“So, let’s set a plan,” Johnny said. “Where do we put the rocks we remove? It won’t do to just make another big pile behind us.”

It was Jerry who broke the moment of silence.

“Let’s string them out along the bases of both walls. That way we can still get through if we need to. Of course, it’ll mean extra energy to carry them that far.”

“Still, it sounds like a good plan to me,” Johnny said.

Jerry agreed with a nod and they got to work. They soon learned to be careful which rocks they removed. Even so, from time to time the rocks above would break loose and tumble to the floor sending one or all of them scurrying out of the way. After an hour, no one had been hurt and a considerable number of rocks had been moved. Like Abbot had predicted, more rock had fallen out of the ceiling, but they felt they were making headway. Their goal was to just make a crawl-through space at the top of the pile so they could get to the other side and hopefully outside.

Two hours passed and still they had not removed enough of the debris. They took a water break and sat to rest for a few minutes. They began doubling the line of rocks along the walls so they didn’t have to walk so far. It still allowed for fairly easy passage.

After three hours, they were fairly certain they were soon to break through. The rock had stopped falling onto the pile from up in the ceiling.

Abbot raised his hand and put his finger to his lips. The others stopped. They listened.

Clink . . . Clink . . . Clink.

“Somebody is working on the other side coming this way,” Abbot said.

“Good guy or bad guy?” Johnny asked. “We didn’t tell anybody we were coming back here. Also, if the bad guys found the mule gone they would have come here to find it. The scales are heavily tipped in favor of bad guys being on the other side of this heap of rocks.”

“So, what do we do?” Jerry asked, some degree of panic displayed through his voice.

They all looked at Johnny. It wasn’t that he didn’t have an idea – he had half a dozen. He just needed to sort through

them and find the one that offered the best chance of success.

“Here’s one idea,” he began. “Let’s each gather up a number of small stones suitable for throwing and hurting an enemy – if that should be who’s over there. Then we can move back a bit and ambush him while he’s still climbing down this side of the rock pile.”

Without comment they went to work filling pockets and hats with suitable rocks. Abbot had a suggestion.

“How about building a low wall back here with the big rocks we’ve removed. It would give us some protection if he has a gun – like a snow fort in a snowball fight.”

Again, it took no discussion. They looked to Abbot to establish the ideal distance from the collapse and went to work. The wall was soon four feet high. That satisfied several unspoken requirements: high enough to duck down behind for protection from bullets and yet low enough so they could stand behind it with room to throw their stones with the power of full arm motion.

In the end, the wall was actually a pile of rocks three feet wide at the base gradually pyramiding to being just one rock thick across the top. They sat and waited. Jerry rescued a few more apples and carrots from the mule’s stash and they ate, sitting on the floor behind their protective wall. For the first time, there was no real conversation among them. They all understood they had come to a crucial (very important) moment in their young lives.

A rock tumbled down on their side of the pile signaling whoever it was, was getting close. Johnny turned off the lantern. They stood and stooped so they could just look over the top of their wall. Hearts raced in their three young chests. Their breathing became full and rapid. Muscles tensed.

Presently rays of light pierced the darkness from a tiny opening near the ceiling. Gradually that hole became larger and larger and their area was lit well enough so they could see the large pile of rocks and each other’s faces. Johnny had been right. They were filthy, looking much, he thought, like coal miners after a long day’s work. On the plus side, that would help them blend into the darkness behind them.

They arranged their collection of small stones in front of them and waited.

A voice called out. They couldn't make out what it was saying and none of them recognized it. It called a second time. Privately, each boy figured that meant it was the bad guy whose voice they would have no way of recognizing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Then, the nature of the voice changed. Someone else was speaking. It was lower and stronger and clearer.

“Johnny, Jerry, Abbot. You boys in there?”

“Marshal?” Johnny called as a question, standing up as straight as the height of the tunnel would allow.

“Yes. That you Johnny?”

“Yes, with Jerry and Abbot and the mule.”

“There are four of us out here. We’ll have an opening big enough for you to crawl through in no time. Stay put.”

Johnny smiled and whispered to his friends, “As if there’s any place for us to go.”

“I heard that,” came the Marshal’s words.

At last the boys had something to smile about.

“Still a problem,” Jerry said to his friends. “The mule. We can’t just leave it in here.”

Johnny had been thinking about that.

“It seems to me the bad guy is very dependent on that mule – it plays a major role in the success of his plans. I just imagine he will find a way to get it out.”

Very soon the opening was large enough.

Abbot was the first to climb the pile and slide through to the other side. He was followed by Jerry. Johnny first handed the lanterns through and then made his way toward freedom.

As his face appeared on the other side he saw the Marshal, several deputies, and Doc with his bag. Good old Doc, there just in case, Johnny supposed.

“Well, imagine meeting you folks here,” Johnny said hoping for a laugh before the Marshal and Doc started in on

him for his 'confounded idiocy', and 'lame brained irresponsibility'.

He'd had endured the lectures before. It was good material and he planned to work it into one of his stories later on.

"Any broken bones or cuts or scrapes," Doc asked stepping forward. "Do you need water?"

"I think we're all relatively undamaged," Johnny said. "Let's just skip the medical stuff and get right to the bawling out."

Doc had to chuckle, as hard as he tried to remain serious.

"There will be time for bawling out later," the Marshal said. "Did you find out anything worthwhile?"

"That mules like apples, carrots, pears, and yams, but I assume you mean in relation to the missing women. No. Well, not really no, either. Abbot has put some things together that seem important. Tell the Marshal."

Abbot related the story about Otto working the mine as a young man and his relationship with Cappi, the construction crew and perhaps the attempted bank robbery.

"Well, I'm not sure what all this does to our relationship with the kidnapers," the Marshal said as they made their way back toward the entrance.

"Probably didn't help, I'd say," Johnny offered.

"Or," Abbot added, "Maybe not if they didn't actually see any of us. So, the ceiling collapsed making it necessary for them to rescue the mule. I'm sure Otto knows about ceilings falling in old mines."

"Interesting," the Marshal said. "I suppose we will soon find out. I assume you sent a note since you released the mule."

Johnny related the message.

"Actually, a very good idea," the Marshal said. "Like I said, we'll have to wait and see what takes place."

"I suppose the note should have called for a reply of some kind," Johnny said. "The way we left it communication is sort of cut off."

"Well, we did learn one other important thing," Doc offered. "The mule is not going to lead us to the kidnapers or

the place they are holding the women. It frees us up to search for other alternatives.”

“Good point, Doc,” Johnny said. “Now aren’t we all happy the tres amigos inteligente tried this caper?”

It was met with silence.

“You may choose not to speak, but we can feel your growing respect,” Johnny said hoping the men would see it as humorous.

They did but would never let on.

Outside, Johnny had a question for the Marshal.

“How in the world did you find us?”

“Used a trick I learned from an old Pawnee Indian scout. I untied your three horses and they were soon following your scent or some such thing. They led us right to the cave opening.”

“But, there are all kinds of tunnels in there. How did you find the right one?”

“Somebody had most thoughtfully made arrows with sticks pointing us in the right direction.”

“I see. You are very good, Marshal. Thanks, by the way.”

A deputy brought the horses up the trail from where they had been hidden in case any bad guys showed up. In minutes, they were on their way back to town. It seemed odd to the boys to see Doc riding atop a horse instead of in his buggy. They had never thought of him on horseback. It hardly seemed right.

Johnny spoke of it.

“I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen you riding a horse, Doc. I must admit you seem pretty comfortable up there – totally out of place, but comfortable.”

The Marshal turned toward Johnny.

“Remember that Red Bend Days Race you and Abbot rode to a tie a few months back? Doc won the very first of those races when he was a young man.”

“Really! Nice going, Doc! Here we know two celebrities, guys. Doc the race horse rider and Aunt Bea the expert marksman. You got any happy ghosts like that in your closet, Marshal?”

Doc started to offer something, but the Marshal

interrupted clearly not wanting whatever it was to be made public. Another mystery for Johnny to solve – later.

“So, we seem to be getting nowhere fast,” Johnny said. “Time for Plan B.”

“And what would that be?” Doc asked.

“I have no idea, but I’m sure by morning we will have it ready.”

“And by we you mean . . .”

“The tres amigos inteligente, of course.”

The Marshal turned to Doc.

“The tres alborotadores, is more like it.”

Doc nodded and chuckled. [Translation: The three troublemakers.]

The boys all understood and took it as a compliment.

“I think we’ll stop and clean up in the creek, Marshal,” Johnny said.

The other two boys looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“Just promise you’ll head straight back to town – our town, Red Bend in the state of Kansas. And know that I’ve never been found to be happy about having to go looking for the same person twice in the same day.”

Johnny looked at his young friends.

“One might think the Marshal doesn’t trust us. Whatever might have given him such a mistaken idea?”

The boys played along shrugging and shaking their heads.

Half an hour later, Jerry and Abbot had to admit it really did feel better to be cleaned up. Regardless, they still couldn’t believe a boy their age carried a bar of soap in his saddle bags!

Back in town the boys turned into the livery stable, put up the horses and delivered themselves and the huge, untouched, lunch to Jerry’s room. The air had turned chilly so they built a small fire in the little iron stove that sat against the rear wall. Jerry made coffee for himself. The others made unpleasant faces for him and pumped water for themselves.

They were exhausted from the hard work and after eating, all three were soon sound asleep on the floor right where they had been sitting.

When Johnny awakened, it was nearly six in the evening. He didn't disturb the others, but scooted back, leaning against the wall for some serious thinking.

The bad guy's operation appeared to involve at least two people, one of whom might have been a woman. Thinking an old man might not be up to all the necessary physical activities, he expanded that to a minimum of three. Furthermore, he thought the old man may not have been the brains behind it. Gypsies stayed mostly with Gypsies according to Abbot so that probably described the other two as well.

They had to proceed as if the women were being held locally because the boys had no way of working the mystery beyond that. The location had to be very private – so private that there was no chance anybody would bother them even by accident. He felt certain that meant somewhere rural. They had seen lights from several farm houses from the mine exit point at the wagon trail. He wondered if there were abandoned houses or barns out there.

There was a slim chance some part of the mine was being used to hold them, but he discounted the idea because on the chance the mule was followed – like it had been – they wouldn't want to give up the place they had their very valuable merchandise – the women. Six thousand dollars apiece, he thought. Of course, he would never put a monetary value on human life.

They had to move forward with the idea the bad guys would be armed. That they would at least be in some way dangerous went without saying. Once they received the money they needed a quick getaway method – horses and wagon or buggy or down to the train, perhaps. Maybe the stage. Maybe just horseback with pack animals to carry the money – that seemed unlikely since the plan had rather rapidly evolved to involve coins: three tons of coins. He needed to get another note to them to make sure they understood how much all those coins would weigh. It might change things back to cash. Those were the only real options – cash or coins. He wondered if the mule would be back under the bridge the next day.

He thought back to part of the conversation the boys

had in the cave. It certainly seemed it was a case of a rather intelligent person acting in a rather ignorant fashion.

He was concerned about the women – especially his Aunt. He really didn't know Mrs. Yeager, although he certainly didn't want her to be harmed either. His aunt and Mrs. Yeager had grown up together there in Red Bend. He figured his aunt was a number of years older. At least they were among friends in that respect.

He unrolled his bed roll and turned in for the night.

Old Mrs. Stevens' rooster crowed at five a.m. and all three woke up. Jerry and Abbot groaned themselves back into the realm of the living, reflecting the very uncomfortable sleeping arrangement for which they had opted – sprawled out on the hard, wood floor with their appendages (arms and legs) in positions in which appendages were never intended to be.

For breakfast, they finished the lunch from the night before. They had not, as Johnny had promised, yet devised a Plan B.

"So, what's our next move?" Abbot asked.

"Find the women," Johnny said planting a smug look on his face.

"Let me rephrase that. What's our next move in locating the women and bringing them home safely?"

"I'm thinking that we need to set up a systematic search of the surrounding area – 360 degrees around Red Bend."

"You understanding the whole rest of the world surrounds us. Can you be more specific?"

"No. I can't. I suppose we set up a search pattern in circles centered on Red Bend – do the smallest one first, the next largest second and so on."

"And so on until we hit California and New York?"

"If that's what it takes. This is Aunt Bea we're talking about."

"Sorry," Abbot said. "I didn't mean to minimize the importance of our mission."

"Minimize. A good word. Your mom and grandmother been feeding you pages from the dictionary?"

It was worth a smile in return, but no attempt at a comeback.

Johnny continued, making up Plan B as he went.

“The Marshal, Doc and Cilla all know the surrounding area. Let’s get their help to draw a map locating possible hiding places.”

“That sounds good,” Jerry said. “How do we start?”

“At the restaurant. One or more of them should be there very soon. We can do the stalls first and still be there by the time they arrive.”

They made short work of cleaning up downstairs. Their horses seemed disappointed when the boys left without them, but the fresh oats in their feed troughs appeared to provide some consolation (comfort).

They gathered at Doc’s table before he arrived.

“Orderin’ or waitin’?” the waitress asked flashing a smile indicating that either was fine with her.

“Waiting, for now, thanks.”

She had soon returned with glasses of lemonade.

“Fresh batch. Need your opinions if it’s good enough.”

She offered a wink.

“Thanks. We will savor it and render an opinion posthaste.”

That had been Johnny. The waitress leaned down toward the others and spoke in a low tone.

“How do you ever understand what he’s sayin’?”

“We often don’t, ma’am,” Jerry responded. “We just smile and nod a lot.”

Humorously, she looked directly at Johnny and smiled and nodded.

Precisely at six, Doc entered. Making sure the boys saw him he turned and pretended to leave.

“Everybody’s a comedian this morning,” Johnny said as he eventually arrived at the table.

Earlier they had moved in three additional chairs, hoping to make it a sextet (group of six). They all stood as Doc arrived. Doc looked them over.

“What no salutes?”

Doc shook his head and took a seat.

“So, to what do I attribute this august (impressive) gathering so early in the day?”

“Need some help.”

“So, what’s new? Sorry. Go on.”

“We figure we need to know all the possible hiding places in the area just outside of town.”

“The Marshal’s deputies have already searched them.”

“Really,” Johnny said.

“You didn’t think he was just sitting here waiting for you boys to solve this, did you?”

“Frankly, I hadn’t given it any thought – too involved in our own investigation I suppose. I guess they didn’t find anything or we’d have heard about it.”

“I suppose that’s right. Haven’t seen Cal yet this morning.”

“Plan B-1, then,” Johnny said, unfolding a blank sheet of paper he took from his shirt pocket. He began drawing a map – mostly blank.

“Here is Red Bend. Here is the creek to the east of town. Here is Sunday Creek to the west and there is the old bridge. The mine is up here.”

He indicated each on the emerging map.

“Help us add outlying buildings and natural features. Then we can find out from the Marshal which ones he and his men have searched. It will cut down the size of our search area.”

Before long a dozen buildings had been added to the map – houses and barns, some currently in use and others that were not.

“Caves or things like that?”

It had been intended as a question from Abbot.

“One cave I know of. Under a little waterfall on Sunday Creek a few hundred yards north of the mill. And, you probably want to add the mill – just north of the bridge about a half mile over to the east of the trail that continues on north. Used to be the road that ran down to the bridge.”

“A cave under the waterfall?” Jerry asked.

“It is a small water fall, maybe ten or twelve feet across. Usually not a lot of water going over it but enough for a steady flow – varies with the season and the amount of rainfall, but I suppose that went without saying so let me move on. Every little kid in town knows there is a monster living in the cave and none would go near it – undoubtedly a story fabricated by parents generations ago to keep their children safe from the

hazards presented in such a natural structure.”

“Parents do things like that?” Abbot asked as if amazed.

“They protect their precious children any way they can. Too many, to my way of thinking, use fear.”

Abbot was still learning about parents and the lengths to which they were willing to go to safeguard their children.

“Tell us about the mill,” Jerry asked.

“Built by the man who came to the area to raise wheat on a grand scale. Named after him – Medford Mill – but often referred to today as the Sunday Creek Mill. I was built in my late teenage years so it must have been some forty years ago. I think he had a good idea – using this rich prairie soil to raise wheat. Too bad he died before he really got it all up and running.”

[Today Kansas produces more wheat than any other state – 20% of the country’s annual crop.]

“I’ve never seen the mill,” Johnny said, “but then I really haven’t spent much time on that side of town – living as I do on the other. There’s probably a ride on up that way in our near future. I assume he built it before his first crop came in.”

“That’s right. Took the better part of a year to complete. He cut the large stones for the tall base from a quarry twenty miles further north. Brought in master stone cutters to do that.”

“I think they are known as stone masons to be precise,” Johnny added.

Doc acknowledged the information with a slight nod and continued.

“The huge beams and planking used for the floors and siding were cut from a stand of hundred-year-old trees north east some forty miles. Used teams of six mules to pull the special wagons to get both the stones and the wood to the mill site.”

“A huge undertaking,” Abbot said.

“That it was. Like I said, unfortunate that he died and nobody else was farsighted enough to just take over what he had started.”

“Was the mill ever used?” Johnny asked.

“Sure was. Operated the four years Medford was

growing wheat and for two or three more after his death.”

“Big, small, medium?”

“The size of the mill, you mean?”

Johnny nodded.

“I would say very large for a mill. He and his wife lived on the upper floor – an unbelievably fancy place the way I heard it back then.”

“Who owns it now?”

“I have no idea. Cal or Cilla will probably know.”

In and among his story telling, his usual breakfast of steak and eggs was delivered and he managed a bite now and then as he held forth.

The Marshal opened the front door for Cilla and the two of them made their way back to Doc’s table. Again, the boys stood. Jerry helped Cilla into her chair.

“Cal, Doc,” she said, “you could take a good lesson from master Jericho, here. Can’t understand why he’s still a single man.”

It was worth smiles, but not chuckles. He mood was serious that morning there at the rear of the big room.

Johnny soon had the new arrivals working on his map. Several places were added – both abandoned barns that had stood alone in the wheat fields. The Marshall indicated where he and his men had already completed their investigation.

“You do a really thorough search of all those places, Marshal?” Johnny asked.

“No, son, we rode by and spit tobacco juice in their direction and called it a day.”

“I didn’t mean to disparage your skill, Marshal.”

“Disparage? You’re clearly spending way too much time with Cilla.”

“It means belittle, mock, ridicule.”

“I know what it means. Stick around me and you’ll find I am neither unintelligent nor ignorant.”

The boys and Doc chuckled. Cilla had no idea what was going on (since she hadn’t been with them the day before), but seemed to enjoy it. Her only surprise was that the Marshal had used the word ‘nor’ correctly.

“Any other possible hiding places, guys?” Johnny said, ready to refold his map and leave.

They had nothing more to offer. Abbot had one more question.

“Are all the wooded areas marked on the map?”

The three ‘old timers’ took another look. The Marshal pointed at two additional spots and Johnny drew them in. The boys left.

Outside, Johnny addressed Abbot.

“What was that about woods?”

“I got to thinking that, since we are assuming the Gypsies have something to do with this, they could be using a covered wagon hiding in a wooded area.”

“Good catch,” Johnny said. “And, wagons can move from place to place. If they see us searching close by they can just move. And after we’ve searched an area they can return figuring we won’t be back.”

“Your head always takes things in different directions than mine,” Abbot said. “Those are really good possibilities.”

“Back into the saddles, I suppose,” Jerry said.

“Where shall we start?” Abbot asked.

“There are three buildings marked on our new map and two stands of trees south and east of town. A close cluster of places. How about starting there so we can cover a lot of spots in a short amount of time?”

The others nodded. It seemed to signal the necessity for a foot race and the three of them tore off down Main Street reaching out and touching the door of the livery stable at the same instant. Johnny figured that Jerry was really the fastest of the three, but he’d never allow himself to embarrass the others.

Jerry checked in with Harry who was almost back to being his old self. Jerry was worrying about him less and less. Harry seemed very pleased that he was having time to spend with the other boys.

Within a few minutes, they were headed south along the creek on the trail that would take them to the railhead and eventually to Sandy Ford if they were to follow it that far. Instead, after a half mile, they turned east and would complete the circle – counter clockwise – east to north to west and back south.

The first item on the map was a stand of trees that had

been part of the area where the Gypsies had made camp close to the creek when the carnival had been in town. They spread out twenty yards apart and rode from west to east. They moved north a bit and repeated the ride back east to west.

Jerry spotted something on the ground and dismounted to investigate. The others stopped and waited for a report.

“A huge horseshoe. Pinto’s hoof would fit inside it.”

“For a Gypsy draft horse,” Abbot explained. “They are huge and powerful with hooves as large as two hands side by side. It was probably left behind when the family moved on, back in the summer.”

The next stop was an abandoned barn – a fallen down and rotting barn would have more appropriately described it. Because of its condition the Marshal had skipped it. That made it all the more interesting to Johnny.

They dismounted and walked through the ruins – kicking at this and that.

“No place for anything to hide in there,” Johnny said at last.

“Except for that rattler you’re about to step on,” Jerry said. “Stop and stand still.”

That sounded like an excellent idea to Johnny who stopped breathing as he stood very still.

Jerry moved closer – slowly and with great caution.

“It’s alright. Move quickly on ahead and you’ll be fine”

Johnny was skeptical, but figured Jerry knew about such things so he made the move and was quickly ten feet away. The snake barely flinched.

“How could you have known it wouldn’t try to strike me?” Johnny asked.

“Look at it. Three lumps along its length. Probably three mice who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Once a rattler starts digesting food it becomes very sluggish. I figured you were probably going to be safe.”

“Probably? You told me to move and you were only probably sure?”

“I think you would call it a educated guess.”

“Actually, I’d call it an educated guess – the ‘an’ before a word beginning with a vowel thing, remember.”

There were smiles between the two of them and rolled eyes between Jerry and Abbot. They mounted up and moved on to the next possibility – an abandoned farm house to the north.

Aside from lots of missing shingles and several broken windows on the first floor, it wasn't in such bad shape. It needed a paint job, but then so did most of the houses farmers were living in around there.

They stopped some twenty yards from the front porch looking it over. The front door was closed. One window appeared to have been recently boarded up. They rode a slow circle around the building and stopped in the back yard. Jerry pointed toward the back door.

“Newly chopped wood,” he said.

Johnny dismounted. The others followed his lead.

At the very same moment they all saw it; a face appeared in an upstairs window – a face sighting down the barrel of a shiny new Winchester rifle!

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CHAPTER FIVE

Johnny ran toward the house. The others hesitated, but then understood. Out in the open like that, the safest place would be right up against the building where they couldn't be seen from the upper floor. At least they would be safe until the person with the gun came down stairs and out onto the porch.

The house stood out in the open with no trees or outbuildings. There was no place to hide. It seemed immediately odd to Johnny that there was no wagon and were no horses to be seen. That made it unlikely, he thought, that it was the kidnapper's hiding place. He took a chance and stepped back out onto the lawn, hands in the air, looking up at the window.

The face was gone. He soon understood why. The back door opened slowly. Jerry and Abbot sensed what was happening and they both ran around the side of the house out of sight. They had no idea what Johnny was up to.

An older man carrying a rifle appeared in the doorway.

"Morning, Sir. I'm Johnny Baker from Red Bend. I'm thirteen years and some months old really hoping to make it to fourteen. I'm counting on you being one of the good guys in this world. May I put my arms down?"

The man nodded, breaking a smile and lowering the rifle.

"What in tarnation are you three kids doing out here?"

"I suppose I could ask the same of you."

"Very good. Yes. I see. You first since I am the one with the rifle."

He offered another smile.

“We are out for a ride looking over abandoned buildings to see if there might be a story in them – I’m a writer in the making I suppose you could say. Already had a story published in the Red Bend Newspaper.”

“I see. Well, I’m Edgar. My son and I are traveling west from St. Joseph, Missouri heading to see family in Denver. He took the team and wagon into Red Bend for supplies. We’ve been holed up here while we rebuilt a rear wheel we broke fording that red-water creek back there a piece.”

The other boys approached them, having been listening from the corner of the house.

“These are my best friends – Abbot and Jerry or Jerry and Abbot if you read from right to left.”

All of the others put on frowns. Jerry spoke to the man.

“Johnny’s head tends to go off to really strange places sometimes. Just know that he is typically all quite harmless.”

It was worth chuckles. Johnny had to admit he reveled (really liked) in such comments about how he approached ideas. He certainly didn’t want to be just like everybody else – how boring a world would that make!

“I guess you haven’t run across a couple of bad guys in there holding two women hostage, have you?” Johnny said at last.

The old man turned to the other boys.

“I see what you mean about that head a his.”

“I guess we’ll be on our way, then,” Johnny said, “unless there is anything we can help you with.”

“Got things under control here, but thanks. You boys have good hunting or whatever it is you’re really up to.”

He gave them an exaggerated wink that none of them understood. They mounted up and moved out.

Johnny took out the map and studied it as they rode.

“The next place is a barn just north east about a half mile. That’s probably it over there.”

He pointed toward the eastern horizon.

Jerry spoke.

“It seems to me that this is a very long way from the bridge. Would they be this far away?”

"I've been wondering the same thing," Johnny said. "On the one hand, it is a long way, which makes for a lot of traveling back and forth, but on the other hand having a hiding place that's a long way away may seem safer. They may be directing our attention to the north east of town when it's really all about somewhere else. That's why I figured we'd begin down here and work our way back around to the bridge."

"Or, they may be half way to Denver with the women by now," Abbot said."

"That's a possibility. It poses lots of problems for the bad guys though: communication back and forth about what's happening here – the ransom payment – being the main one. I'm betting on them still being around here."

"Let's get the barn checked out, then," Jerry said and he picked up the pace as they crossed the flat, grassy, stretch to where it sat.

It was in much better shape than the first barn although one side of the roof had collapsed and the doors lay on the ground. It looked to have never been painted and from a distance the large, open gaps between the upright strips of siding appeared like dark, vertical, stripes. The hayloft door was hanging down at an angle by one hinge, clearly in danger of falling to the ground at any time.

They pulled to a stop and dismounted. Johnny walked to the door and looked inside. The area on the first floor was empty. To the right of the door there was a ladder that clung from the opening in the floor above. He approached it and tested it with his weight to make sure it would hold him. The other boys followed him into the barn and watched as Johnny climbed. Near the top, he slowed and peered into the area above. It was lighter than the first floor due to the large opening in the roof. His presence disturbed several sparrows that took flight through the hole above. A number of rats scurried toward the opposite walls and disappeared.

"It's just as empty up here as it is down there," he said after looking around for a few moments. "Doubt if it's seen a human foot up here for ten years or more."

He made his way down the ladder, jumping the final four feet to the ground. Back outside, Johnny unfolded the map against his saddle and showed the others where they

were headed.

“Just one place left on this side of town. Another old house a mile north. Then we’ll head north west and check out the woods just this side of the bridge.”

They were immediately on their way again.

Pinto became skittish (nervous) and Jerry slowed, leaning forward, patting her neck, and speaking in quiet tones.

“What’s the matter, girl?”

The others also pulled up and watched and listened.

Jerry loosened the reins and nudged her to choose her own way. She turned east toward a shallow gully. Upon arriving at the top of the slope, the reason became obvious. There was a spring that fed a small pond, which eventually trickled on south disappearing along the well greened bottom of the wide depression.

“I guess she’s thirsty,” Jerry said. “Horses that have a history on the dry trails of Texas have the idea they need to drink every time they sense water’s available.”

They dismounted and let the horses move toward the water. The boys recognized their own thirst and lifted their canteens and drank. Johnny smiled, wondering to himself if Pinto had really been smarter than they were.

“Look over here, guys,” Jerry said pointing to the mud beside the pond.

They all looked.

“Some hoofprints,” Johnny said.

“But look at the size,” Jerry went on. “As big as that horseshoe we found down south of here.”

“You’re right,” Abbot said. “I’d bet it’s from a Gypsy horse. They are mostly used for pulling wagons, but are often, also saddled and ridden.”

“This print can’t be more than a day old – probably less,” Jerry said looking around. “What’s a Gypsy doing here?”

“Only makes sense in one way,” Abbot said. “A Gypsy is hardly ever alone. The print suggests this one was. I’m thinking that ties it to the kidnapers – since we think there are only two or three of them all with their separate jobs to take care of. I’ve wanted to say this before, but now feels like the right time. Most of the Gypsies I’ve known, and I’ve known hundreds and hundreds, are really fine people. The few of

them that aren't make the headlines and give all the rest a bad name. I mean, look at me. They just took me in and cared for me because they thought it was the right thing to do. These bad guys we're dealing with are not your run of the mill Gypsies. I'm not saying Gypsy men aren't often rowdy and may skirt the law sometimes. They enjoy a good fight, but usually with other Gypsies, not outsiders. And after it's over they embrace as friends."

"I think we understand," Johnny said. "I've known some despicable (really bad) white men. A gang of them shot me and left me to die on the trail. I'm sure Jerry has known or at least heard about bad Pawnee's. The great thing is, like you say, most of the members of any group are good people. Once we put these bad guys behind bars it will make just that many fewer bad Gypsies on the prowl in the world."

Outsiders might have thought it all sounded like a sermon, but to the boys it hit at the heart of who they were, who they had come from, and who they were trying to become.

Jerry followed the prints for a while. They continued north within the soggy gully.

"Seems to be sticking to the low area here," Jerry said. "The drier footing would be much better up on the prairie. I'm thinking this rider didn't want to be seen."

"There isn't any indication where he came from," Johnny added. "He must have dropped down from the prairie at this point. Maybe he was getting close to something or somebody he didn't want to see him."

"That could have been us, you know," Jerry said. "Like I said, the hoof print is fresh."

"Or, someone shying away from the deputies when they were searching out here yesterday," Johnny said.

The boys looked around, suddenly paying closer attention to what was going on around them.

"So, do we continue following him down here or go back up there?" Abbot asked.

"If he saw us before, and if he wants to avoid us, wouldn't it be better to go back up on top so he'll think we don't know where he is?"

As confusing as his phrases had been the others

understood and nodded. They mounted up and were presently moving back north west away from the gully, which continued straight north for another quarter of a mile.

Abbot seemed the most nervous about the close encounter and continued to look back over his shoulder from time to time. The others noticed, but didn't comment although if pressed, they would have admitted to some continuing discomfort about it, also.

At first glance the house appeared to be a disappointment. It looked to have only two rooms on one floor with a porch roof fallen to the ground in front and a storage building in back that had mostly burned down some time before. Still they stopped to take a look.

Both doors were boarded closed as were the two windows in front. Putting their combined shoulder strength to the back door they managed to shove it open enough to slip inside. It was dark. It was still furnished with chairs, tables, beds, cabinets, and such. The dust was thick. Clearly it had not been in use for a long time – probably years. There were books lined up on a shelf near the fireplace. Jerry was immediately drawn to them. He brushed the dust from the spines and read across the line of titles.

“Suppose it would be alright to take some of these?”

“I can't see why not,” Johnny said. “Here's an idea. We'll take what we want and leave a note about where to find them if somebody wants them back.”

It seemed like a reasonable plan and soon a dozen books were blown free of dust (well, mostly) and distributed among the six saddle bags. The note directed any interested party to contact the newspaper office in Red Bend. They were immediately on their way again, heading almost directly west toward the stand of trees just east of the creek near the bridge and below the rise on which they suspected a lookout might be stationed. By then they were well north of town.

The woods was home to mostly tall, old, pine trees, looking quite out of place there on the Kansas prairie. Johnny figured there was a story behind how they got there. Their shiny dark green color offered a nice alternative to the still bare-branched oaks, mulberry and maples that were native to that area of the country.

“So, what are we looking for in a woods like this?” Abbot asked as they grew close?”

“Not at all sure,” Johnny said. “Best scenario would be a small campsite partially occupied by Aunt Bea and Mrs. Yeager, with the guard gone, I guess. Less than that, some indication of a camp, I suppose. We’re running out of places to look.”

“How do we go about the search – like we did down south of town?” Jerry asked.

“I’m open for suggestions if anybody has something better.”

Nobody did, so they spread out and moved through the trees, side by side some twenty yards apart. It took four sweeps east to west and back west to east before the area had been fully searched. Once again, they came up empty. Aside from sending a few ground squirrels in to conniption fits, and clearly angering a number of crows, they had little to show for the hour.

They left the woods on its west edge just thirty yards from the base of the rise that was blocking their view of the bridge.

“What about exploring the rise?” Abbot asked.

“Probably a good idea,” Johnny said. “We have reason to think somebody will be up there. Do we show ourselves to him or not?”

“I vote no, unless somebody has a convincing argument to the contrary,” Jerry said.

No one offered any, so they left the horses at the edge of the woods and began the climb. It was a small rise that hardly even qualified as a hill – maybe thirty feet above the meadow from which it rose. Side to side it looked to be less than fifty yards wide.

They could see the entire side from where they stood so they made their way up the slope side by side. They paused near the top looking up to where two ten-foot-tall, well weathered rock slabs stood upright leaving a gap of six or eight feet between them at their bases. They leaned in, to within a few feet of each other at the top. The one on the north might have been just a bit taller and wider. There was no doubt about it – it would make a great lookout spot.

It was close to noon and with the sun directly above them, there were no shadows in which to hide. Abbot raised his hand and they stopped. He put his hand to his ear and they listened.

“A mouth organ (harmonica),” he whispered.

Johnny sank to his knees and assumed a crawling position. The others did the same. They inched forward up the incline, slowly, thinking a lookout would be looking in the direction of the bridge – the opposite direction from where they were. Still, they worked their way up the remaining ten feet slowly and cautiously.

Abbot whispered.

“It will be old Otto. He plays the mouth organ and that’s a Gypsy lullaby he’s playing.”

Suddenly, the story they had concocted with virtually no facts to back it up, seemed to become a reality.

Johnny leaned in close to the others and whispered.

“Since you know the man, Abbot, you scoot on up and take a look. No reason to give the man three moving targets to attract his attention. Just verify that’s who it is.”

Abbot nodded and inched his way into a position from where he could view the area between the rocks. He hesitated for just a moment before backing down to where the others waited. He nodded. Without words they scooted back down the hill to the flat of the meadow.

“I don’t know whether to be glad about what we found or sad,” Abbot said.

The others understood their friend’s ambivalence (uncertainty), but they were flat out excited about the find. Finally, they really knew what they were up against and had pretty well made the connection to the foiled (blocked) bank robbery. In one very private way Johnny was relieved. None of what suddenly seemed to be true made it appear that knowledge of his personal wealth played any part in it. He was just being punished for his role in preventing the robbery.

“We need to share what we’ve learned with the Marshal,” Johnny said.

The others agreed and they backtracked across the meadow to the horses. As much as Johnny wanted to know if the mule was back, he understood it was best not to be seen

by Otto just then. They were still buying time.

Twenty minutes later they entered Main Street. As was his custom, Abbot pulled off at the livery to check on Harry, saying he'd catch up with them.

Johnny and Jerry entered the Marshal's office, Johnny speaking

"Good news! Except for having actually located the women, we have this whole thing wrapped up, solved, explained, case finished."

"And here I thought the case was all about finding the women. Silly me," the Marshal said. "Where's Jerry?"

"He'll be along, why do you ask?"

"Three of you left town together this morning. I think it would be a good idea if three of you returned together this noon."

Johnny turned to Abbot.

"I do believe the Marshal was worried about us."

"Sure sounds like it. The big man has a heart, it seems."

"This big man has a responsibility to protect the citizens of Red Bend and a few of those citizens seem to be much harder to keep track of than the rest," he said, attempting to put on a gruff manner.

The boys laughed. The Marshal managed the hint of a smile.

"Had lunch?" he asked. "No. Of course you haven't. I'm hungry. Come with me. At least that way I'll know where you are."

Doc and Cilla were already there. Jerry caught up just in time to follow them inside.

They immediately recognized that something was wrong – well, different at least. Doc's little table had been replaced by one twice its size. Doc noticed the second takes from them as they approached.

"I figured if I was going to be the center of the universe back here, I needed to make more room."

"Room for us 'stars' in your universe, you mean," Johnny added.

The grownups groaned. The youngsters yucked (laughed). They were soon all seated and Johnny began

filling them in on the tres amigos' morning as they had ridden the circle around the town. He deferred to Abbot to explain about Otto.

With that out of the way they realized their situation was basically identical to what it had been before they made the search. Well, they knew where NOT to look and Johnny suspected that was a step forward of a sort.

"We still have a handful of places north along Sunday Creek. Is that mill still in good shape or has it fallen into disrepair over time?"

"Still in pretty good shape, I'd say," the Marshal said. "Haven't had reason to be up that way, myself, for several weeks. I did notice the water wheel wasn't turning any more. It's an overhead delivery wheel – the water comes down a long wooden trough from behind the mill and falls onto the wheel from above. Must be some blockage up on the creek where it enters the waterway to the mill. I had two deputies up there this morning looking around for the women. They didn't find anything. Like you boys, we've drawn a blank everywhere we've searched. I'm leaning toward the idea they are keeping on the move – in one of those wooden covered wagons Gypsies use."

"Vardo," Abbot said. "The Gypsie wagon is called a Vardo."

"What about that idea – on the move in a vardo?" Johnny asked directly to Abbot.

"I could be. The problem with that is they couldn't outrun a turtle in one of them if they were being chased. They are wide and long and heavy – very heavy. If the idea of having to escape is on their mind, that wouldn't be their first choice."

"It could be they don't expect that we will search for them since they have the women who they could threaten with harm if we approached them," Johnny said.

"Gypsies are not that naïve," Abbot said. "They tend to be suspicious of everybody and every situation. If they are not on the move, they will be ready to be on the move at a moment's notice. That you can be sure of."

"Good to know," the Marshal said.

"It seems to me it's time to rattle the bad guys a little

bit,” Johnny said.

“Oh, you don’t think caving in the mine they’re using wasn’t enough to do that,” Doc said.

Johnny continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted.

“How about laying out the problem of the coins to them? I’m thinking they’ll switch their demand back to bills and just figure they have to wait and spend them in California or New York or someplace far away.”

Cilla addressed the Marshal.

“Is Mr. Yeager still trying to get the ransom money together?”

“Oh, yes. I hope it takes a while because once he has it he’ll insist on making the payment. If I tell him it’s a bad idea, he’ll just try to do it himself – you can bet on that.”

“Cilla, let’s write a note,” Johnny suggested.

She took out paper and pencil. They all turned toward Johnny waiting for him to dictate the note.

“Well, let’s try a first draft,” he said. “You can all add and subtract from it. How about something like, ‘We are trying to do exactly as you wish but there is a problem. We have found out that \$10,000 in silver dollars will weigh several tons and fill sixty saddle bags. Using large bills, they could fit into two saddlebags. Do you still want us to go ahead and get the coins?’ ”

Cilla finished writing it down. She looked at Doc.

“Sounds fine to me just as it is,” he said.

He looked over at the Marshal.

“I agree. They will have to rethink things, like Johnny suggested, but shouldn’t be mad at us about it. The note makes it seem like we are really trying to do what they want and even make it easier for them. Nice job. How do we get it to them?”

Again, all eyes turned toward Johnny.

“How about we just ride up to the bridge and leave it there. Make it obvious we are leaving something so Otto will know it’s there. If the mule happens to be back, we can put in its saddlebag and turn it loose again. If not, we can put it in an envelope and tack it to one the bridge supports.”

“Any other suggestions,” the Marshal asked looking around.

“Just one,” Abbot said. “Cilla, the note will need to be printed. I doubt if they will be able to read your fancy writing.”

“Good point,” Johnny said. “And, the last one was in my printing. Perhaps I should print this one as well.”

They all agreed. The note was soon re-done. They all marveled at how such a smart kid could have such atrocious (terrible) penmanship.

“Now, who delivers it?”

“I vote for the Marshal,” Johnny said. “They need to know the communications are coming from the one they contacted in the first place. It’s what they will be expecting, don’t you think?”

Everybody agreed. Cilla slipped the note into a large envelop and passed it to the Marshal who folded it and tucked it into the pocket of his black leather vest. He directed a question to Abbot.

“Did Otto seem to have a gun – a rifle?”

“I didn’t see one. That’s all I can say.”

“I suppose the tres amigos will insist on riding with me.”

“I suppose so,” Johnny said. “And that’s tres amigos inteligente – you keep forgetting the inteligente.”

“Believe me, I didn’t forget.”

It got a laugh. Perhaps there was hope for the Marshal’s sense of humor after all.

They finished lunch.

“Well, you inteligentes ready for a ride,” he asked.

“I suppose we’d all four be more ready after a piece of pie, though, don’t you?”

With one apple pie cut into quarters and enjoyed to the fullest, the four of them were soon heading west toward the creek where they would turn north to the bridge.

“You understand you will need to hang back and stay out of sight once we get close,” the Marshal announced as if they needed to be told.

They nodded. The Marshal nudged Gray into an easy gallop and they managed those three miles in a short time. He pulled up near the bridge.

“Stay back here. Shouldn’t take me but three minutes.”

He was correct. He galloped back and stopped with information to share.

“The mule is back – well, not the mule, a different one, as black as the other one was gray. I left the note in the saddlebag and untied it. It left immediately. Let’s move out.”

They urged their horses on down the trail toward Red Bend.

“Why a new mule,” Abbot asked.

“Could be they weren’t able to free the first one yet from the collapsed tunnel,” Jerry suggested.

“If that’s the case, this mule will have been trained to go someplace else, don’t you think?” Johnny said.

“That makes sense,” the Marshal said. “It had to have been their Plan B right from the start. Like it’s been said, to train a mule that way took some time. Somebody had put a great deal of thought into this operation.”

“There’s still no chance that wherever it goes will lead us to the women,” Johnny said. “I guess we’ll have to wait ‘til morning and see if we get a response.”

“We better get a response or we’re in a real pickle, boys,” the Marshal said. “We’re hittin’ the bottom of the barrel when it comes to new options.”

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CHAPTER SIX

The boys decided to ride on north along the creek and check out the few remaining places marked on the map. The Marshal told them to be back in town by dark. He rode south east, cross county to Red Bend.

The trail was overgrown indicating it was seldom used in recent years. They rode single file. Jerry with his better knowledge of the outdoors took the lead. The first item of interest on the map was the large old mill. About half way there, Jerry pulled up and pointed to the right at the base of a low hill. There had been a rockslide.

“Very recent,” Jerry said. “See how the muddy sides of the rocks are showing – facing every way but down where they belong. Those have been setting in the ground for years. Rain hasn’t washed them off. Maybe only last night. Buried the bushes and tall grass at the foot of the slope right here.”

“And look there to the right,” Abbot said, also pointing.

“A cave, maybe?” Johnny said really asking as he slid to the ground.

“At least a depression there back into the rocky side of the hill,” Jerry said.

The others dismounted and they crossed the ten feet of tall grass and bushes to investigate.

“More than just a depression,” Johnny said having been the first to stick his head inside. “Dark but goes back at least five or six yards. I can see that far.”

The others joined him at the opening. It was less than three feet wide and four feet tall – too small to let a horse enter comfortably. Jerry tied the horses to trees.

Johnny proceeded to move further inside providing a running monologue as he went.

“Walls and floor are fairly dry. Unusual for a rock cave. Floor is flat slabs of rock – seem to be naturally set in place. Widens to about six feet and remains that way for a while at least. Do we have any source of light with us?”

“Still have some candles,” Abbot said. “I’ll go get them.”

A few minutes later a lit candle was passed forward from Abbot to Jerry to Johnny. He continued to describe things he was seeing.

“The ceiling varies irregularly from about six to ten feet high. Also, looks to be natural and not carved out in any way. It is quite different from the look inside the mine. It veers north right here at a 25 or 30-degree angle. The floor continues to run level, no real incline or decline. Not sure if we should continue or not.”

“I’d say we’re about thirty yards inside it now,” Jerry said, “for whatever that’s worth.”

“How many candles do we have left?” Johnny asked.

“Three.”

“Then, how about we go as far as this and one more candle will take us before we turn back, assuming the cave actually goes on that far?”

“Sounds fine.”

“Sounds good.”

They continued moving together with no more than a few feet separating them. The small candle provided very little light beyond a few feet.

“What’s that? There on the floor. Shiny.”

The observation had come from Abbot who was by then in the middle of the pack. Johnny turned around and lowered the candle. Abbot reached down and picked it up.

“A glass Gypsy bead,” he said.

He showed it to the others who nodded.

“Let’s think about this,” Johnny said. “I’m going to dose the candle to save it. We’ve recently learned that we really can think and talk in the dark.”

He continued talking.

“The presence of a Gypsy bead doesn’t prove anything,

you know. With the carnival having been in town, lots of bead necklaces and bracelets were left in the area. It could have been left in here by some other kids who found the cave, or by a pack rat, or a dozen other ways of getting here.”

“But, put in the context of our search in which Gypsies play a central role, I think it move up from a possible clue to a probable clue, don’t you think,” Jerry observed.

The others nodded, but of course nobody could see that there in the darkness.

“Assuming it is a viable (actual) clue,” Johnny went on, “it seems to me there are at least two possibilities. One of the Gypsies dropped it without knowing – it fell out of his pocket or something – or – and this is what I’m hoping – Aunt Bea, who already used a necklace as a clue for us back at the house, has another one with her and is dropping beads along the way as clues for us to follow.”

“She is that smart and of course knows you are too, Johnny,” Jerry said. “I say we continue into the cave and see if there are more.”

It was agreed that would be their plan. The candle was re-lit and they moved on. Johnny continued to lead, not because he was an authority on caves, not because he was the bravest of the three, just because he was Johnny.

They walked on. The cave varied little in appearance from how it had looked near the entrance. One spent candle into the trek they had not seen another bead and Johnny had been holding the candle low so they wouldn’t miss one.

Well over a half hour had passed. Johnny wondered why none of the adults had mentioned the cave? Perhaps it was home to a fire breathing dragon and they didn’t want the boys to be toasted. Perhaps it led to a slide that sent explorers into a deep pit with hungry crocodiles and the boy’s crocodile fighting credentials had not recently been renewed. Perhaps . . . he needed to control his imagination. The best way to find out why they had failed to mention it would be to ask them later. He suspected the rockslide had only recently made the entrance visible – the way it had displaced the bushes and grass that had probably covered it. It probably happened since the Marshal and his deputies had been up that way.

The floor began a gentle downward slope. Eventually they came upon two things – one good one not so good.

“An ancient looking wooden door here,” Johnny said. “Looks to be several inches thick – oak planks held together by iron braces and bolts. The frame sets right into the rock wall of the cave. We won’t be getting past it today.”

“Look down there, though,” Abbot said. “Is that another bead?”

He leaned down and picked it up. It was a bead. More than ever they were convinced it had been the work of Johnny’s Aunt Bea.

“So, now what?” Jerry asked.

“Only one logical way to precede that I can see,” Johnny said.

“Of course. There’s just one?” Jerry said nodding at Abbot.

“Right. Only one makes any sense at all,” Abbot replied.

They both turned toward Johnny, shrugging, with hands raised, palms up, indicating they had no idea whatsoever what he was talking about.

“I guess it isn’t as obvious as I assumed. We retrace our step in here, counting the number of paces as we go and draw the best map we can – paying particular attention to the gentle curve it takes. Then, outside we retrace the path up on the ground above, find the place where the door is, and launch a rescue mission to free the women.”

“Oh, that obvious solution,” Jerry said kidding.

“I think that may be the beginning of Plan C,” Abbot said.

“That’s great!” Johnny said. “C for Capture the bad guys.”

On the return trip, Abbot held the candle. Johnny drew the map. Jerry counted the paces, calling them out at every new hundred so that could be added to the map.

Back outside they looked at the map. Jerry called out the final count.

“One thousand three hundred and forty-four.”

Johnny did some calculations in his head.

“Your long legs are equivalent to a grown man’s. A

typical man uses 2,600 paces to walk a mile on a relatively flat surface. So your count represents right at half a mile – also about right for the amount of time it took us to walk it in the near darkness.”

“I see a problem with the plan,” Jerry said.

He pointed to the hill under which the cave was set.

“Up and over is going to take more paces than on the level line we were walking in the cave.”

“Not a problem, amigos,” Johnny said. “Well, maybe a bit of a problem, but we can account for the extra distance to some extent, at least. That hill forms an arc of about thirty degrees, wouldn’t you say? So, if we add 20 percent to the straight-line distance in the cave, I think we’ll come close to allowing for the added up-and-over distance out here. It’s sort of the angle-opposite-the-hypotenuse-thing in geometry.”

“The high – pot – a – what?” Abbot said/asked.

“I thought hypotenuses were large animals that lived in the rivers of Africa,” Jerry added.

“May we take that up later? And that river thing was really pretty funny.”

They continued to survey the hillside.

“The other problem is that going up a slope our paces will be much shorter than on the straight away, but again we can try to account for that. Say our paces are cut in half. Let’s do some rough figuring. Twenty percent of say 1,300 paces is 260 added to the 1,300 is 1,560 and then double that to account for the smaller paces and we are looking at something near 3,000 paces.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Euler,” Jerry joked. (Euler is often said to be the most influential mathematician in history. He lived at around time in history.)

“How do you know about Euler – oh, Doc’s books, I see,” Johnny said. “Very clever, by the way.”

Abbot just smiled realizing that had not yet been a part of his education and that was fine. He would make it a point to look up the old guy, later, however.

“Here’s a plan,” Johnny said. “Jerry, you take the lead. You’ll be too busy choosing your footing to count, so Abbot can follow behind you and do that. I’ll give you directions from the rear to keep you on the course we drew out on this map of

the cave.”

Even though the slope was gentle, Jerry immediately realized Johnny had been right; his steps were no more than half their usual length. Abbot called out every two hundred steps, which he figured should be equal to one hundred of the paces noted on the map. Johnny added that information to the drawing as they went.

It took something over a half hour to come to the spot they had calculated would put them in the vicinity of the door they had located down in the cave. They had all been concentrating their attention on the ground. When they stopped and looked up, they saw that they were no more than twenty-five yards from the mill, which lay straight ahead. It sat on a steep slope just down a short grade and across a narrow stream from where they had stopped.

“The way the cave floor was sloping down in this direction do you think it goes under the creek?” Johnny asked mostly to himself although the others were glad to have been included.

It seemed the only logical answer since there was no opening to the cave and no wooden door in the area.

“Do you suppose it leads into the basement of the mill?” Jerry asked.

“It sure could, if our calculations are anywhere near accurate,” Johnny said.

“Probably more accurately, the mill was built so its base joined up with the cave – since the cave has been here thousands of years,” Abbot pointed out.

It was undoubtedly a more accurate depiction of the truth of the matter, although it really made no difference to their situation.

“I wonder if there was something here before the mill,” Johnny said, once more thinking out loud.

Again, the question did nothing to help solve the present problem, but then Johnny just loved to wonder about things regardless of how useful they might be.

“So, here we are,” Abbot said taking a seat on the grassy slope as they looked across at the beautiful old mill.

It had a huge water wheel – at least fifteen feet tall. The water that powered it ran through a wooden trough from the

left (west) as they looked at it. Just like the Marshal had said, no more than a trickle of water was running from the trough, and the wheel sat motionless. There were four very large windows on the main part of the mill, all of which seemed to still have their glass panes intact. A smaller window sat up higher – closer to the top of the peak. To the right side was a smaller shed-like section attached to the main building with its own roof and a door opening out onto a porch or walkway that wrapped around it to the right (east). It was supported with braces extending up from the rock foundation.

“The main entrance must be on the far (north) side,” Johnny said.

“Well, are we going to just sit here admiring it like a bunch of girls or are we going to investigate it?” Jerry asked at last.

The comment moved them to start toward the building. Johnny wanted to discuss the fact that he thought males could think things were beautiful as well as girls, but chose not to – at that moment. He put his hand up in a signal to stop.

“Don’t make it obvious, but take a look at the window up at the very top of the building. I think I saw something moving behind it.”

The others managed well-disguised glances and confirmed what Johnny had seen. None of them could determine what it was for sure.

“Could have been what’s left of curtains, blowing in a breeze, I suppose,” Abbot said.

“Maybe an animal of some kind trying to get out,” Jerry added.

“Or, maybe somebody connected to the kidnapping,” Johnny said.

“Or that,” Jerry said breaking a minimal smile.

Abbot nodded.

“Just in case it’s a bad guy, let’s turn around and leave the way we came,” Johnny said. “Then we will circle back being more careful not to be seen.”

He searched his pockets.

“Anybody got a piece of string?”

“I have some fishing line,” Jerry said.

“My I borrow it.”

Johnny wound it into a loop, 18 inches across, making it a dozen strands thick. The others watched, puzzled, but didn't ask. He faced the mill and with exaggerated movements slipped it over his head and around his neck, continuing to make a point of moving it one way and another as if wanting it to be seen. As thick as he had made it, it could be seen from some distance away.

After several minutes, he spoke.

"Alright. We can leave now."

He returned the line to Jerry.

"As Doc would say, 'What in tarnation was that about?'" Abbot asked trying to imitate the old gentleman's high register voice.

"What did I make?" Johnny said answering the question with a question.

"Something like a necklace," Jerry said.

"And if Aunt Bea just happened to be the person looking down out of that window what do you suppose she might have figured out from that production I made of it?"

"Brilliant, mi amigo," Jerry said. "She knew it was you, she'd connect this necklace with the ones she's using and would figure out we knew both her plan and where she was."

"I just hope she could put it all together as well as you just did," Johnny said.

"Oh, you can bet she did. She and Cilla come in in a dead heat for the smartest women I've ever known," Jerry said.

"Women?" Johnny asked.

"Well, people, I guess. Not as educated as Doc, but just as smart."

"I agree. Just hope it was her up there. We have no way of knowing," Johnny said. "If she saw it and if it does nothing other than reassure the women, it will have been worth it."

They headed back up over the hill, turning west as soon as they were out of sight from the mill. Soon down the hill to the trail they moved back toward the mill keeping close to the trees and bushes that lined the trail. They left the horses behind.

As they turned a bend they again saw the mill in front of

them. It seemed even larger from that distance and angle, which allowed a better view of the west side of the building. It was even deeper – front to back – than it was wide in front. It was built on a slope and there was no door on that side to allow entrance. The door, therefore, had to be on the north side.

Sticking to the cover of the trees and bushes they carefully approached the bottom of the slope on which the mill stood. From that vantage point they could see that the rock base of the building, where the wheel was attached, sat in a broad depression. Sunday Creek was still in front of them and actually ran on to the north of the Mill where a rock diverter wall had been built to redirect some of the water into the trough that supplied the wheel. Why the water was not flowing onto the wheel they could not determine from where they stood.

The land to the west of the mill sat at a height about one third of the way up from the base of the foundation. That's where the boys were as they moved toward the building. They soon found themselves at an angle that was so severe they could no longer see into the top window – or any of the windows on the south side for that matter.

As they moved alongside the mill – they were still a good twenty yards to the west – they spied the road that led from the north into the rear of the mill – or maybe it was the front of the mill, actually. At any rate, it was the other end of the mill.

There were four large windows on the west side – similar in size and placement to those on the end with the water wheel. From up close like that they appeared to be huge – perhaps twelve feet tall and five wide. They would provide a great deal of light for the working areas inside. There appeared to be three floors; the top floor with the small window, and the first and second floors each having two of those large windows, one on each side.

In order to get to the mill, wagons and riders had to cross a narrow bridge that spanned the creek – Sunday Creek they assumed. They saw the spot where water was diverted from the main channel into the trough that fed the wheel. There was a short, heavy oak plank, door, of sorts, that could

be raised and lowered by turning a large metal wheel. The door was closed. Jerry pointed out that the years of accumulated rust on the thick, threaded axle, which the wheel turned, had a few shiny spot – spots where the rust had very recently been worn off.

“The wheel has recently been turned, which means the water flow has recently been cut off.”

It had been Jerry putting his observation into proper context.

Although they had no idea why that would have been done, they noted it and moved on.

None of the boys had ever been inside a mill and so had only minimal information about what to expect.

From books, Johnny had read a number of years before he remembered several things. The water wheel turned an axle that entered the lower floor. It had several gears along its length which connected with other ‘shafts’ that met it at right angles and extended up into the floors above where they powered various machines. On the main floor, there was usually a set of huge, circular, stone disks, each several feet thick. They had grooves chiseled into them, which ran from the outside edge to the center. One of the stone discs was connected to the shaft and turned. The wheat was poured between the disks and the husks were rubbed off, freeing the wheat grains from the rest of the plant. All of what that created spilled onto a conveyer belt, which moved it to an area of the mill where the grain was sifted from the rest of the plant and eventually ground into flour by another, slightly smaller set of stone disks, also powered by the water wheel. How that knowledge would be of any help to them, Johnny didn’t know. What he did know was that the more he knew about anything the better chance he had of making good decisions and answering questions accurately.

“So, I suppose we need a plan,” Johnny said.

“I guess we will be going inside,” Jerry said as if a question.

“Will this be a rescue mission or a reconnaissance mission?” Abbot asked.

“Reconnaissance! Good word, Abbot,” Johnny said. “Exploratory, information gathering. And I expect that will

define what we're up to quite well. If we find the women, one of us can ride and get the Marshal while the rest of us make sure they remain safe and aren't moved."

When they arrived on the north end of the building they saw several entrances – one regular door for people to use and two sets of large double doors, which would accommodate teams and wagons – wheat from the fields going in and flour coming out, they suspected. To the east was a wide dirt ramp that led at a gentle angle up to a set of doors on the second floor. Johnny assumed that was where the wheat from the fields was delivered to begin the process that would end in flour. On what, at that point, appeared to be the third or upper floor there were two small windows about the size of the one they had been watching on the opposite end. There was no sign of anyone – anywhere. Johnny had hoped for at least a wagon or team of large hooved horses. But, there was nothing to indicate anybody was there or had even been there for a long time. The ground area in front of the mill was paved with flat cobblestones so finding hoof prints was out of the question.

Abbot pointed to the doors at the top of the dirt ramp. They were slightly ajar.

"Looks like a place where we can get in," he said.

"I suggest we go up the ramp and enter one at a time," Johnny said. "Then if trouble develops the rest of us will be available to help."

"Just what kind of trouble are you expecting?" Abbot asked.

"Unknown. Just think it's better to be cautious."

Abbot turned to Jerry.

"We must remember to tell Doc, Cilla and the Marshal that we actually witnessed a moment in which Johnny considered being cautious. It is probably a first."

"Better think of a way to break it to them gently. Can't afford to have any of them get a heart attack," Jerry came back.

"When you jokers are finished having a chuckle at my expense, we need to decide who goes first."

Abbot offered the solution, pointing from one to the other as he spoke.

Eenie, meenie, miney, mite,
Surely you will be just right.

[That is an older version of the modern-day, sing-songy, rhyme children use to make a choice. This is one of dozens of forms the verse has taken since its origin in the 1700s in Europe – or very likely even earlier on the British Isles.]

In the end, he was pointing to himself.

“So, how do I do this – just walk right up to the door or crawl up on my belly?”

“Best would be if you could turn invisible and enter that way,” Johnny joked.

“Although your advice is excellent, I will compromise and climb the slope bent close to the ground. If you hear screams take that as a plea for immediate assistance.”

He turned and left. The others remained more or less hidden in the bushes at the north end of the paved area. They watched as he made his way up the slope. At the top he paused and looked back toward them – then slipped inside.

The others waited. The plan had not been complete enough. Was he to return? Was he to offer some signal for them to follow? Were they to wait some specified length of time and then follow? Johnny and Jerry realized the problem, and expanded the plan between the two of them. The first part of that plan was that Jerry would go second.

“Once you’re inside look around for a minute or so and then return to the door so I can see you. Then I’ll follow. If you don’t return, I’ll go for help.”

It seemed like it was becoming a serious if not flat out dangerous undertaking. Johnny was concerned about Abbot.

Jerry was soon up the ramp and inside. Johnny waited. He waited some more. One minute. Two minutes. Five minutes.

Something had gone wrong. He knew the plan had been for him to go for help, but if he left they might be taken away and he’d never find them. Of course, if he entered and was captured, then there would be little or no chance of any of them being rescued.

“Time for Plan D,” he said softly to himself.”

If they had been immediately seized upon entering, it

only made sense not to enter in the same way. He moved back to the west, still in the cover of the brush. There was a low wall rock that ran up to one side of the door. He bent low and moved along the west side, soon finding himself with his back up against the building. He stood up straight, straddled the wall that was to his right and let himself down on the other side.

He pushed against the door, easy at first and then a bit harder when it didn't open. It moved. It squeaked. Not a good combination, he thought. Still, he pushed and soon had an opening large enough to slip his slender body through.

He found himself in what looked to have once been the main office, which made sense located as it was at the front door. There were two doors, one directly ahead at the rear of the room and another to his left. The first probably opened into the main work room. The second one looked to open into a set of stairs. He chose that one since his friends began their exploration on the second floor.

He moved silently up the old steps pausing near the top so just his head showed above the floor. He took time to look around before risking his whole body to be seen. To his left over his shoulder he saw the double doors his friends had used to enter. They continued to stand open slightly, just like they had been.

It was a very large open space that housed the two sets of grinding wheels he expected to find. The area was well lit from two large windows on the south and west sides, again, as he had expected. There would be no hiding in a shadow once he committed himself up onto the floor.

Nobody was in sight. The enclosed stairway continued around the corner on up to the top floor rising back toward the front of the building. Before climbing the last four steps to the second floor, he hesitated to think things through. The boys were not on the second floor – he could see every nook and cranny from where he was positioned. That meant they either went up or down. Earlier, they had seen movement from the top floor, indicating that was most likely where somebody was, if in fact, anybody was really inside the building. Would that be the likely place to take prisoners?

There were several shoots through which the grain had

been fed down to the first floor after leaving the grinding wheels. The openings in the floor were nearly ten feet wide. He had a plan.

First, he would walk to those holes and look down, trying to ascertain (discover) if they provided any clues to the boy's whereabouts. Then, he would return to where he was and enter the stairway making his way up to the third floor.

He climbed the remaining steps and took a few paces toward the first large opening in the floor. A voice came from behind him.

“Stop right there, young man, or I will shoot!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Without really thinking it through, Johnny dashed to the closest shoot opening and dove into it head first. He tumbled head over heels toward a large bin on the first floor. From years without use, its metal sides were no longer smooth and slick the way he had figured they would be. It was rusted and rough and filthy. His pant leg caught on a protruding bolt and ripped out a small section of the fabric, leaving it behind.

The best that could be said was that no bones had been broken – at least as far as he could tell through the pain.

At the bottom of the bin he found a small trap door, which he figured had probably originally been used to clean it out. He kicked it opened and slipped out onto the floor three feet below. His back ached. His front ached. His arms and shoulders ached. He needed his legs so didn't even think about them.

When he had been confronted upstairs he hadn't turned to look back so had no idea what the man whose voice he had heard looked like. It could, in fact, have been a woman with a deep voice. No matter. He had escaped. He wondered about his friends – and the women, of course. At that point he was quite certain they had found the place the women were being held – and, his two friends as well.

He moved to look out one of the large windows on the south side of the huge, open room. Peering down, he could see the top of the water wheel below and the water trough that ran beneath the window. A plan began to form.

If his friends had been captured and if there were really

only one person guarding the women, the boys would most likely be taken to wherever the others were being held in the building – up on the third-floor Johnny figured. They would surely find a way to let his Aunt know that he (Johnny) was still free and working to get them out. He was depending on the fact that the bad guy who had just lost him would return to the third floor to make certain no one else escaped.

He broke one of the lower panes of glass in the window with the heel of his boot. He carefully removed the pieces sticking out from the frame and slid through – feet first facing back toward the outside of the building. It was virtually no drop at all onto the trough. He walked to the far end from which the water usually poured. He dropped onto the wheel, grasping it tightly with his hands as he dangled there in mid-air.

It immediately began turning under the weight of his body and he rode it to the bottom. That put him in position to cross the shallow stream – into which the water from the wheel should have been falling. He climbed up the other side.

Thinking there might be a rifle aimed at him from up above, he ran a zigzag course until he was well into the safety of the trees. He headed for the trail and ran back to where the horses had been tied. It was less than a ten-minute run, but gave him time to think what he needed to put on the note to the Marshal. Once there he removed paper from his saddle bag and quickly jotted it down.

“Marshal. Women being held at the Mill – 3rd floor. J and A have been captured. I will go back and see what I can do while I wait for you. Hurry.”

He placed it in one of Diablo’s saddle bags and arranged his bandana so it was hanging out of the same bag – to alert the Marshal to look inside. At least he hoped that’s what it would do. He untied both Diablo and Pinto, headed them south on the trail, and sent them on their way. Pinto for sure would end up at the livery – that’s where she had lived and been fed and cared for the past weeks. With her life on the open range she had more of what could be called natural instincts than his horse. He figured Diablo would either stay with her or stop in front of the Marshal’s office – a place with which he had become comfortably familiar over the months.

He hoped he didn't run on home.

Johnny then ran the trail back north stopping just out of sight in the stand of trees at the base of the hill that sloped down toward the mill. He needed to think. He kept an eye on that upper window. There was no sign of life up there. He wondered if they had been moved down to the cave while he was away. It suddenly struck him that he should have mentioned the cave in his note.

He wondered if his arm was strong enough to throw a rock at that upper window and break it. Just what that would accomplish he wasn't sure – distract whoever was holding his folks if nothing else. He decided against that tactic, at least for the time being. In case the person thought he had left, that would be the best way to leave it.

"Distraction!" he said out loud and he began retracing their steps up the trail to the far end of the big building. He went directly to the small wooden door in the low rock wall that was holding back the water from the trough. If he could get the water flowing, the water wheel would turn and that would probably make enough noise to draw the bad guy's attention.

He tried the wheel that raised the door. He couldn't budge it.

"A lever," he mumbled. "I need a strong lever to provide the leverage I need to move it. A board or a branch I can stick through the spokes in that wheel and turn it. Something six to ten feet long and not too heavy."

He searched the area with his eyes. At the rear of the mill he spotted a rusted pitchfork partially hidden by the tall weeds, which were growing up against the siding. It had a strong looking handle – perhaps a bit shorter than the specifications he had just stated, but everything else about it seemed perfect.

He used the cover of the wall again and hurried, bent down, back to the side of the building. Using the same motion he had used before, he straddled the wall and let himself down on the other side, keeping close to the mill wall. He reached the fork and was almost immediately back over the fence. He returned to the diverter door. The area was out of view of the windows.

He slipped the end of the handle between two spokes

and put all of his weight against it. It still didn't budge.

"Well, that's discouraging! What I need is a tub of grease," he said, again looking around. "Or, maybe water will work in a pinch. It makes floors slick. Maybe it will slicken up the gears. I'll give it a try."

He scooped up a hatful of water from the stream and dribbled it down the wide threads on the axle, which had to turn in order to raise the door. He tried again. It began to turn. He pushed harder and it continued to turn. He soon had the door raised nearly a foot – enough to send lots of water on its way along the trough.

In a matter of moments, he heard the squeaking and groaning of the old wheel as it began to come back to life. He suddenly understood why they had turned it off. With that noise constantly in the background, the person inside would have been totally unable to hear riders approaching on the trail.

"So, distraction number one is set in motion," he said, repeatedly striking his hat against the side of the trough to get it as dry as possible. That really didn't matter.

A few things seemed obvious to him. Clearly, they had been seen as they had approached the mill. The bad guy was waiting for them inside the open door. It hit him in a flash. That's why those doors were open – an invitation to come in and get caught. How stupid could they have been! Hindsight was a wonderful, if often useless attribute (skill). He'd not fall for that ploy (tactic) again.

He needed to get back inside, however, and determine where the four of them were being held.

"Ah, ha!" he said. "They'll never expect me to return the same way I left. In fact, I hope they don't expect me to return at all."

He figured with the initial noise the wheel had made when he used it lower himself to the ground, he had drawn the person's attention and had most likely been seen leaving the mill.

He moved out along the wooden trough. Its sides were nearly two feet high. It was also two across from side to side. There was six inches of water running through it. It was built to carry at least three times that much so he was certain his

added weight would pose no problem for the structure. He waded back to a spot below the window where he remained crouched contemplating his best next move.

He took off his hat and moved it slowly above the window sill so anybody looking out would think it was somebody on the outside. If there was trouble, he'd hurry on down to the wheel and make his exit on it in the same manner he had before.

There was no response to the hat. Cautiously, he stood up. By standing on the side of the trough he could just see inside. Unless somebody was standing beside the window with their back to the wall, there was nobody in the room. He pulled himself up and with some amount of effort was soon back inside.

The water wheel was so loud that it would have been difficult to carry on a conversation inside the building near that wall. He moved toward the stairs at the far end of the room. It was not his desire to use them. That hadn't worked all that well the last time he had tried.

He looked up at the ceiling, searching for some alternative means of moving up to the second floor. He could probably crawl back up the shoot he had slid down. It was not slick, but it was probably too steep. That was most likely not a viable (workable) idea.

He noticed that when he walked out in the middle of the room the floor squeaked; in close to the walls it didn't. He moved carefully to the east wall and stopped to listen. If that floor squeaked, the second floor probably did also. He heard nothing coming from up above. There was a bench under a window. He sat to do some figuring.

It would take the horses between fifteen and thirty minutes to get back to town depending on how fast they moved. With two horses that loved to run full-out as much as they did, Johnny figured they would be there sooner rather than later.

"Say, twenty to get there, five for the Marshal to find the note, read it, get some deputies together, and twenty to get back here at a full gallop. I'm looking at forty-minutes, minimum."

That seemed like more than enough time in which to

move the folks, if that was the bad guy's Plan B. They would have to come down the stairs to get out of the building – either out the front door or out into the cave. He needed to get down to the basement and find that door to make sure their calculations had been accurate. If there was no entrance into the cave it put a whole new light on the bad guy's strategy. It was also important to try and somehow delay them from leaving in the first place.

He decided to take just five minutes and see if he could find the door to the cave down below. The stairway from the first floor did not continue into the basement. He searched the floor for a trap door, which he found close to the south-east corner of the big room – just inside from the water wheel. It was large and heavy. There was a rope loop extending from the center of the edge away from the hinges and a large hook on the wall into which it fit. He ignored all of that. It took some major effort to lift, but he succeeded. He leaned it back against the wall and looked down into the space below. It was dark, except for what light filtered in through the trap door opening.

He began descending the stairs – twenty-six by his count. They were wide and thick and covered in cobwebs and dust. That number of steps suggested the basement was nearly twenty feet high. It looked to only occupy the ten feet near that south wall. The floor was covered in cobblestones like the entry area out front.

The huge axle from the water wheel entered the stone wall just behind the stairs. It extended eight feet to a sizable wooden box, which Johnny figured housed the main gear mechanism that transferred the power from the wheel on upstairs. The steps came to an end ten feet from the door that he had felt certain must be there.

The door was secured with a thick oak timber that fit across it and slid into heavy iron brackets on each side. He moved the timber up and off to one side. With relative ease, the door swung in toward him on its huge, long rusted, iron hinges. On the other side was the cave – just as he knew it would be. The question of why the mill was hooked up to it still baffled him. It was a topic for later consideration.

He closed the door but did not replace the timber in case he might need the tunnel for a quick retreat later on.

Just then the heavy trap door above him slammed shut.

“I was not prepared for that,” he said out loud. “It feels a lot like closing the lid on a coffin. Not at good thing, I’d say at first take.”

The basement area had changed from fascinating in dim light to downright scary in inky darkness.

He felt his way across the wall to the stairs and started up them. He held one hand above his head so he would know when he had arrived at the top. There it was, the heavy door. He needed a strategy. If somebody had closed it, their intention would have been to keep him down there. He reached out and felt the wall. It was vibrating from the movement of the water wheel. Just possibly it was that vibration that had nudged the door and caused it to fall shut. He should have tied it in place and suddenly understood the reason for the rope loop and hook.

Since he was doing nobody any good down there in the damp darkness, he decided to risk a peek – assuming he could raise the door. If something heavy had been placed it – like one of the several barrels he had seen – he would not be able to open it and would have to make his exit through the cave, which would be way to time consuming. Marshaling the strength in his arms and shoulders, he pushed up on the door. He was greatly relieved when it budged. He continued to push it up just far enough to make a crack through which he could get a good look into the room. He could see no one there so slowly pushed it higher and higher until it was open and again laying back against the wall.

He climbed up onto the floor and reclosed the door. He looked around for some way to access the second floor without using the stairs. He searched the ceiling with his eyes.

Two things came together for him – what looked to be a loose plank in the rear corner of the ceiling and a tall ladder lying on the floor.

He would need to move the ladder without making any noise. He had no idea whether or not he could do that. The groaning and screeching from the water wheel would mask a lot. He would move it in starts and stops hoping it would blend in with the noise from outside. Within a few minutes, he had

the ladder standing in place along one wall in the corner. It didn't reach the ceiling.

Still, he climbed it to the top taking a short, narrow board with him. He pushed the board up against the ceiling plank. With much less effort than he had expected would be needed, he raised the plank and pushed it to the side. The one beside it took a bit more doing – some prying – but soon he had a space cleared that he was sure he could fit through if he could only reach it.

He stood with his back toward the ladder and inched his way up to the very top rung.

"I've tried foolish things before," he said to himself.

It wasn't clear to him whether he had offered that as an excuse in case his next move didn't work or merely as a statement of the facts of his life.

With that he jumped the three feet to the opening, grabbing the edge of the floor above. As a result, his feet propelled the ladder to the side and it fell to the floor.

"So much for an escape route," he said looking down at the ladder where it lay.

He dangled there fifteen feet above the floor with only the strength of his fingers standing between modest comfort where he was and extreme pain if he fell.

It took some fancy maneuvering, but presently he had worked his elbows through the opening and up onto the floor above. From there it was not difficult to pull himself to safety. He sat back against the outer wall and breathed heavily – some from the amount of energy he had just expended and some from the realization that he had just tried a very dumb thing.

"Dumb or not, it worked. I will kick myself later."

He stood and looked around the room. He had been there on the second floor before. Currently, he was on the east side of the room. The first time he had come up the stairs at the north. He saw the stairs. That time, at least, no evil villain was standing in them toting a gun waiting to do him harm when he arrived.

It was the first time he noticed that the palms of his hands had been rubbed raw – most likely from the header he had taken down the rusted, metal, shoot, or from hanging onto

the water wheel or from the edge of the hole in the floor through which he had just moved. They weren't really bleeding and yet they weren't really not bleeding – raw.

He stood and went to the open stairs and looked up listening, hoping he would be able to hear voices. He couldn't. If the man who had built the mill had lived in it, the living area would have to be on the top floor – it certainly was not anywhere else. That meant there were probably several rooms up there. Rooms had doors, and closed doors muted sounds.

He hesitated to climb the stairs, having no way to tell if somebody were up there watching for intruders. He needed to think things through before he made a move. There was a large barrel in the rear corner. He went to it and scooted himself up into a sitting position on top of it.

* * *

Back in town the horses arrived trotting down Main Street as if they owned it. Pinto turned into the livery – the way Jerry always directed her upon arriving back in town. Diablo continued to the hitching rail that spanned the area in front of the Marshal's office and the restaurant – across the street from the building that housed the newspaper and Doc's office.

He stood there quietly for a few moments. Presently he looked in one direction and then the other, up and down the street. Seeming to be dissatisfied with the amount of attention he was (or wasn't) receiving, he stepped up onto the sidewalk in front the Marshal's office and nudged the door with his head. (Apparently, the humans were not doing their part!)

The noise led a deputy to open the door to see what was going on.

"You gotta see this, Cal," he said calling over his shoulder.

The Marshal was soon at his side, scratching his head.

"That's Diablo."

He went on out onto the sidewalk, backing the horse down onto the street and tying him next to Gray. It was his turn to look up and down the street.

"I don't see the boys or either of the other horses," he said addressing his deputy. "You run on up to the livery and

see if they are there.”

The deputy took him at his word and took off on a trot to the end of the street. He disappeared inside the double doors, immediately reappearing with his hands held high signaling they were not there.

Cilla had seen the commotion through the big window in front of her desk and crossed the street to check things out.

“What’s going on, Cal?”

“Johnny’s horse arrived without him. We can’t locate any of the three of them.”

Doc crossed the street.

“May I make a suggestion,” he said as he stopped beside Diablo.

“Of course,” the Marshal said.

“Look inside his right saddle bag.”

“You puttin’ your shingle out as psychic, too, now, Doc?”

Without really hesitating the Marshal walked to the rear of the horse and immediately understood. He unbuckled the bag bearing the bandana and found the note. He read it to himself and passed it on to the others. The deputy returned.

“I’m starting up to the mill,” the Marshal said. “Get two more deputies and follow me at the gallop. Serious stuff, as Johnny would say.”

The Marshal was immediately in the saddle, heading west out of town. Doc walked Diablo back to the livery, thinking he would be more comfortable there. Cilla bit at her lower lip, clearly upset, and returned to her office.

The deputies were also immediately on their way and soon closed on the Marshal ahead of them. Fifteen minutes into the ride the Marshal pulled up and stopped. He pointed off to his right.

“That’s Abbot’s horse.”

“And that’s a cave right behind him,” one of the deputies said.

“I’d almost forgot about it,” the Marshal said. “Been behind a thick stand of brush for years. Looks like a recent landslide there.”

“Why would the boy’s horse be tied here,” the deputy asked.

“Good question. Tell you what. You see what you can find inside there. I see you’re carrying a lantern. Hope you filled it.”

“Yes, sir. It’ll burn clean through the night.”

“The rest of us will ride ahead to the mill. When we get it in sight we’ll tie up the horses and go in on foot. I have no idea what to expect.”

They did just that.

“The only entrance is on the north side,” the Marshal said. “Let’s go.”

Staying low, they followed essentially the same path the boys had followed and were soon crossing the cobblestone paving and approaching the front doors. The Marshal pointed to one deputy and then to the doors at the top of the dirt ramp. He understood and worked himself into a spot beside those doors. The other deputy took the double doors on the ground floor. The Marshal waited at the front door to the office. Once the others were in position he gave the signal. They drew their guns and entered the building, quietly and cautiously, but clearly ready for a fight.

The Marshal crossed to the rear of the office and entered the main room through the door there.

“What in tarnation?” he said, stopping and doing a double take.

“Thought you’d never get here, Marshal,” Johnny said. “Stop off for a slice of pie before riding to our rescue?”

There they were: the banker’s wife, Aunt Bea, the three boys and a man and a woman, both of whom were tightly bound in fish line, squirming on the floor.

“I need the story, folks,” Cal said.

They all began talking at once. The Marshal raised his hands and pointed to Jerry thinking he’d get a concise edition from the young man of few words.

“Well, let’s see. I want to get this exactly right. The two women were being held up on the third floor in the apartment by the woman.” He pointed at her. “We had seen movement up there through the top front window so suspected that was where they were. She had a rifle and a revolver and kept them locked in one room – the center front room with the window. Abbot and I came inside – one at a time – and

unfortunately, she captured us immediately and took us upstairs and locked us in the room with Bea and Mrs. Yeager. About fifteen minutes ago that man arrived and came upstairs. They talked in Ramani, a Gypsy language, Abbot understood – neither of them recognized Abbot, we think because they lived with the construction crew away from the main group. Anyway, the man immediately started herding us down the stairs. Abbot heard him say we were headed for the cave, which he seemed to assume would be a safe hiding place.

He lined us up, Mrs. Yeager first, Aunt Bea second, then Abbot, and I was last. The man and the woman followed close behind with their guns on us. It was quite frightening – for me at least.

We went down the steps from the third floor to the second. Mrs. Yeager moved slowly and cautiously. At the landing where the steps turn to go down from the second to the first floor, Abbot spied two glass beads on the top step. He moved one of them with his foot so I would be sure to see it. We immediately understood that Johnny was about to do something – you know with Johnny you can never predict what he's going to do, but we were both prepared. I'll explain about that bead stuff later.

“Anyway, we continued down that section of stairs until the women had stepped off and were standing down on the first floor. Then it happened. The man and women were about half way down themselves when, from out of nowhere, this huge barrel came rumbling down the stairs behind us and knocked both of the bad guys down. Before they could react, we three boys collected the guns, trussed them up good and tight with fishing line and the rest you see before you on the floor.”

Johnny spoke directly to the Marshal.

“Otto, the one we have suspected all along, will be found sitting on top of the rise above the bridge on Sunday Creek. He'll probably be playing his mouth organ. Approach him from the east. These two have already spilled their guts – I apologize for that crude way of putting it, ladies. Anyway, we all five heard their confession and we had it figured exactly right. They were after the banker's money to replace what they didn't get in the unsuccessful robbery they had so

carefully planned. They took Aunt Bea to get back at me. They don't seem to be sure what Otto – who is the mastermind, by the way – had planned for the women once he got the money, but it sounds like there wouldn't have been anymore apple pie or ham and yam casserole in Red Bend.”

* * *

Aunt Bea accompanied Mrs. Yeager to her home; she was extremely upset and Bea thought she would stay with her for a day or so to help her get herself back to normal.

Johnny, Jerry and Abbot met their three mentors at the restaurant where the boys regaled them with every detail of the adventure, which seemed to become more and more exciting and dangerous as it unfolded.

With that done, Johnny spoke.

“Now, before we get your lecture on being sensible and cautious and careful and thinking ahead and using our intelligence instead of our innate, adolescent, impulses, I really think a round of strawberry pie is in order, don't you?”

“No lectures,” the Marshal said. “I appreciate your assistance.”

He lifted his coffee mug.

“Here's to the tres amigos inteligente?”

They all joined in the toast.

“By the way,” the Marshal went on. “Mr. Yeager informs me he has a substantial amount of reward money for each of you.”

“Oh, no! Not more money!” Johnny said without thinking.

The adults chuckled. The other boys looked puzzled. Johnny drowned his sorrows in a second piece of strawberry pie! It appeared he would have no trouble paying for it!

The End

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