



# **The Mystery of the Crimson Bandit**

**Book five:**

**The Doc and Johnny**

**Old West Mystery Series**

**by**

**David Drake**

# **The Mystery of the Crimson Bandit**

## **A Doc and Johnny Old West Mystery**

*Book Five:*

By  
**David Drake**

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**Books should be read in order.**

**Book ONE: Johnny's Secret**

**Book TWO: The Red Bend Bank Robbery**

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

**Book FOUR: Kidnapped!**

**Book FIVE: The Crimson Bandit**

**Book SIX: The Baffling Stagecoach Robberies**

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## **BACKGROUND**

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

In the third book Johnny decided to research the fate of a young 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, and who was also an orphan. They became close friends and worked 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.

In book four, his Aunt Bea was kidnapped during the week Abbot came back for a visit. Johnny, Abbot and Jerry went about the process of solving the kidnapping though not before Jerry and Abbot got caught and held along with Bea. The three boys became known as *the tres amigos inteligente*. (the three intelligent friends)

## CHAPTER ONE

June had arrived in central Kansas. It was hot – that’s HOT, H-O-T, HOT! Johnny was without his two closest friends. Abbot had returned to Garden City where he lived with his mother and grandmother. That was as it should be; Johnny understood that. Just the same, the week they had been together in the early spring had been a really great time – well, except for Aunt Bea’s kidnapping, and coming close to being done in by a small group of rogue (uncharacteristically evil members of a group) Gypsies. He continued to miss him.

And Jerry, as a result of Doc’s connections, had been given the opportunity to spend the summer in Wichita, Kansas with one of Doc’s old friends – a fairly famous veterinarian. It was the field of study Jerry seemed to be leaning toward – animal doctor. Doc thought spending the summer like that would be a good way for him to find out whether or not the field really seemed right for him. Johnny understood all that, also, and was happy for him. He was lonely and bored that was the problem. At that moment, it just seemed to him like nothing exciting every happed in his life [perhaps he needs to go back and review the first four books in this series!!].

Johnny had ridden in the stage coach with Jerry on the trip south east to Wichita and helped him get settled in for the summer. (Jerry discovered that some of his ‘scholarship’ money could be used to support him for that kind of thing.



Wonder how that happened!) He was staying with friends of Cilla's. They were also in the newspaper business.

On the way back home, Johnny had taken the stage north to Kansas City. His lawyer wanted to sit down with him and discuss the details of how his money was being invested and managed for him. As much as he hated the whole 'having lots of money thing' he thought it would be a good time to get it over with.

While he was in Kansas City, his home town, Johnny wanted to revisit the newspaper office where his father had been an assistant editor before the fire that left him and his mother dead and had necessitated his move to Red Bend to live with his Aunt. It was a pleasant reunion with people who had been a part of his life since he had been a little boy.

While he was there in the city again, he had planned to take a ride past the block in which he and his parents had lived, but when it came right down to it, he decided he'd rather remember it the way it had been, so didn't do that.

It was over a week since he had left Red Bend with Jerry. They could have made the trip much faster by train, the way most folks had begun to travel by 1880, but it would have entailed four train changes and layovers in strange places, and anyway, Jerry was still very uncomfortable with the huge, black, smoke belching, steam spewing engines that pulled those long strings of railroad cars.

Johnny was exhausted and was happy to finally be on the last leg of his journey back 'home'. That's how he felt about the little town on the prairie and Aunt Bea's little ranch and the little house and his little room and his very own, very comfortable little bed. In a few more hours he'd be there resigned to spending a very boring summer alone.

He sighed and looked from passenger to passenger – there were just two others with him on the stage coach. One was a very pretty woman in her late thirties, he figured. She was wearing lots of jewelry and a pretty dress. She smelled of some wonderful perfume he had never smelled before. He wondered if women and girls wore perfume because for some reason without it they smelled bad. It hadn't really been a

serious 'wonder'. She was heading to Denver to be with her husband who had a job as an accountant at the mint. It sounded like a pretty good job to Johnny. She was traveling by stage because she wanted to stop and see friends who lived in places the train did not service.

The other passenger was a man in his fifties – or sixties or seventies. Once a guy passed twenty-five Johnny had great difficulty estimating his age. Anyway, his hair had begun receding from his forehead and was graying with thick sideburns that were virtually white. He was chubby and his stomach jiggled when the coach hit a bump. Johnny thought it was humorous, but did his best to keep from chuckling. The man carried a new looking leather valise (suit case) that not only locked in two places along the top edge but had two leather straps encircling it. It appeared to be heavy. Perhaps he was a salesman and was carrying samples – maybe bottles of liquid – that would be heavy. The man clearly didn't want to be engaged in conversation so Johnny had stopped trying.

The road was dusty. The day was hot. Johnny really wanted to shed his shirt, but that sort of thing wasn't done in the presence of a well-dressed lady by boys his age back in 1880. So, he lay his head back against the seat and was soon asleep. Typical of the teenage male of the species, Johnny could go to sleep anywhere, in any position, at any time.

At first it seemed to be a part of his dream – the first shot that he heard. The second awakened him. The third had him sitting up and leaning out the window to see what was going on up front with the horses. The stage had stopped. The cloud of dust it had kicked up behind it was overtaking it so his initial view was not clear.

The driver and the man riding shotgun were lying face down on the ground ten yards from the stage. Johnny could see they were both breathing and saw no evidence they had been shot.

Then he saw him – a man, gun drawn, riding a beautiful black horse with its twin on a rope behind. The man was dressed in crimson boots and shirt, and black pants, vest, and

hat. His holsters and gun belt were a match to his boots and he wore a black mask across his eyes and nose. Although fascinating to Johnny, he immediately understood that it couldn't be a good thing.

The man rode up to the side of the stage where Johnny sat. He tipped his hat politely and addressed Johnny directly.

"I require your help, son. The man's valise – you will bring it outside and secure it to my pack horse. The method will be obvious."

Johnny didn't hesitate. He stood and moved toward the man sitting across from him. The man held tightly to the case.

"Not going to be as easy as it sounded, Sir," Johnny called to the man in the crimson shirt.

He rode closer and pointed his gun through the window directly at the plump passenger. The man released his grip and Johnny jumped to the ground with the valise where he approached the extra horse. There were ropes arranged to hold the case and Johnny tied it in place.

The man in the crimson shirt leaned down from where he sat on his horse and spoke softly to Johnny.

"Soon you will understand that I am really not the despicable human being I may appear to be. Have a safe journey."

He then began speaking in a much louder voice clearly intending to be heard by everyone.

"This young man will count out loud – slowly – to five hundred. Nobody moves until he is finished. Then, you are free to be on your way. I apologize for the inconvenience and any alarm I may have caused you."

He tipped his hat to the lady and galloped off into a stand of trees beside the road. Johnny began to count. The driver stirred as if about to stand up. Another shot rang out convincing him to wait out the count on the ground.

"And, five hundred."

The drivers stood up, brushed the dust from their clothing and checked on the passengers. They soon had the

stage on the move again.

It was still a two-hour ride into Red Bend. Johnny offered his condolences to the man about the loss of his case, but even that didn't garner a response. The woman was visibly upset and fanned herself much too rapidly with a colorful folding fan.

Johnny got down to the business at hand.

"Did anyone notice anything about the bandit that might help identify him?"

Again, the man remained quiet, dabbing at his forehead with his fancy linen handkerchief as he looked out the opposite window. The woman tried to help.

"His odd wardrobe," she offered. "Expensive silk shirt, red-dyed boots, probably a specially made mask – can't just go into a mercantile (store) and buy one of those."

"And that crimson gun belt," Johnny added himself. "Another item that had to have been specially made for him. And, did you notice the way he spoke – not the pattern typical of a highwayman (horseback bandit)."

"I noticed – more like a teacher or preacher or lawyer."

"Educated, I'm guessing," Johnny said putting it all together.

She nodded. The man sighed. The driver yelled encouraging words to the team. Johnny felt a wonderful rush inside his chest. He had a new mystery on his hands – he would call it, The Mystery of the Crimson Bandit.

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As the coach and team entered Main Street, Johnny stuck his head out the window and blew three long blasts on his whistle. It was the local signal meaning danger. He hoped it would get the Marshal's attention. It did.

Johnny was out the door and onto the street before the stage pulled to a stop. He trotted to meet the Marshal who was hurrying in their direction.

"Robbed by the Crimson Bandit," Marshal.

"The what?"

“The Crimson Bandit. I just coined the moniker (nickname), myself, but I’m sure it will catch on. Bound to be another story in it. Get your statements from the drivers and the other passengers, then over lunch I’ll fill you in on what actually took place.”

On the surface, Johnny’s remark may have seemed humorous, but Cal knew it was probably true. Johnny’s powers of observation were far superior to those of most people.

By then, Cilla and Doc had arrived on the scene, both more concerned about Johnny’s wellbeing than hearing about the holdup.

“I’m fine. The pretty lady and the fat man are fine. The drivers and the four horses are fine. We need to get to work. Restaurant would be the best place. Can’t tell you how much I’ve missed the good cooking here in Red Bend. I’m starved. And, oh, yes, Jerry’s fine down in Wichita. By the way, I smell another great story for our paper, Cilla.”

“Our paper, is it now?” she said, kidding him.

He smiled in return. Since having his Pony Express story published he really did feel like he had a stake in the paper.

“That reminds me,” Cilla said. “My editor friend from Wichita sent a letter saying he’d like to reprint your story in his paper. Apparently, Jerry raved about it and you to him. I took the opportunity to send him a copy, thinking I could probably convince you to allow it if I plied you with breakfast, lunch, and supper every day for a week.”

“That’s great? Thanks?”

Doc’s eyes danced.

“And by ‘that’s great’ are you referring to the publication of your story or the meals?”

“How about both?”

Back at Doc’s table inside the restaurant, Johnny went into great detail about the robbery and the other passengers.

“You got information about the man who was robbed,

right?” he asked the Marshal.

“I did. Said he was a businessman from Emporia on his way to Colby, Kansas – a relatively new town in the northwest corner of the state.”

“And the contents of the valise?”

“He said it contained money he was carrying to purchase a general store out there.”

“That would be a very expensive store. The case had to have weighed forty or more pounds and that would be a lot of cash.”

Johnny went on to do some calculations using facts few other people in the entire state would have known. Johnny loved obscure facts.

“A stack of bills one inch high contains 233 bills. Each bill is about 12 square inches. Say that valise was 8 by 24 by 12 inches that would be about 2,300 cubic inches. Dividing that out there would be something over 21,000 bills in that case. That’s a lot of paper – no wonder it was so heavy. A bill of any denomination weighs one gram so that’s 21,000 grams or just under 50 pounds.

“You’re right, a lot of money any way you figure it.”

“Looks like we need to make sure there is a general store for sale out in Colby,” Johnny said.

“It seems like you are forgetting that it’s the bandit who is the bad guy, not the man who got robbed,” the Marshal said.

“I know that how’s it seems. But why did the bandit only rob from that man – that one passenger? Why didn’t he ask for the woman’s jewelry – she was wearing diamonds – or ask for the lock box from the stage – he could see it sitting up top? And, how did he know the exact size of the man’s valise? The arrangement of ties on the pack horse exactly fit that valise. He knew what he was after.”

“It would seem that way,” the Marshal said. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to go ahead and check it out – to see if a store is for sale.”

Johnny turned to Cilla.

“Where would you get a fancy silk shirt like that?”

“I suppose big city stores might carry them, but my best guess is he had it tailor made. That could have been done anywhere.”

“Same for the mask, I’m thinking – tailor made, I mean,” Johnny said. “What about the dyed leather. The leather guy here in town made me a set of bright red reins for Diablo, so I suppose that’s another ‘anywhere’ sort of item.”

The others nodded. It seemed the bandit’s apparel had brought them to a dead end.

“Did I mention his saddle and saddle bags and reins were also crimson? I don’t think I did.”

“No, you didn’t,” Cilla said. “Not sure how you can use that, however.”

“You never know. You never know,” Johnny said.

“Can you give a better physical description of the man?” the Marshal asked.

“Over six feet. Appeared to be built a lot like you, Marshal. You been moonlighting as a fancy togged (dressed) highwayman?”

Only Johnny seemed to think it was humorous.

“Come on guys. It may have been in poor taste, but that was a really funny remark.”

Doc smiled. Cilla shrugged. The Marshal ignored it. Johnny continued.

“He had broad shoulders and, oh, he wore crimson gloves as well. And his spurs were silver and they were discs, not stars like most are. I’d think dull disks would tend to hurt a horse less than sharp stars. Maybe that tells us something about the man as a person – gentle and kind.”

“A gentle and kind stagecoach bandit,” The Marshal said. “It seems like you are out to make this crimson guy into some kind of good guy, Johnny. He just held up a stage coach and fired potentially deadly bullets at it.”

“I’m not at all sure of that – the bullet part of it. You’ll need to ask the drivers, but I’m thinking none of his bullets came even close to hitting anybody. Even the last one he fired from the woods didn’t kick up any dust near the drivers on the ground. It would have if it had been close.”

“I’ll check it out. Makes absolutely no sense, you understand.”

“That’s the point. And, Marshal, surely you know me well enough by now not to expect sensible thoughts this early in a case.”

“A case, is it, now?”

“A case and most likely a story later. Any reports of this Crimson Bandit operating anywhere else, Marshal?”

“I’ll have to check. No wanted posters have arrived about such a hold-up man. With a guy who makes the impression he does I’d think I’d have heard.”

“That’s probably right. Maybe I got to witness his first performance.”

“Or, better yet, his only performance,” Doc added trying to rein in the boy’s clearly run away imagination. “What about that man makes you so forgiving of his action?”

“Just after I tied the valise in place on his packhorse – identical to the one he was riding, by the way – he leaned down close to me and said, ‘Soon you will understand that I am really not the despicable human being I may appear to be. Have a safe journey.’”

“That is interesting,” Doc said. “Few highwaymen ever seem to be concerned about the impression they leave behind – unless they want to be remembered as violent and ruthless like that gang that left the slug in your chest last year.”

“One more thing,” Johnny said. “The lady on the stage noticed it also. C.B. – short for Crimson Bandit – spoke with an educated tongue – almost perfect English. And he used the word ‘despicable’ – worst of the worst. An educated man, I’m quite sure.”

“It would seem so,” Cilla said.



Johnny turned back to the Marshal

“We probably need to ask the drivers about the man’s horses. They were clearly well-bred and expensive. Beyond that I don’t have the necessary knowledge to comment. They might have some ideas about them that would be helpful in catching him.”

“So, you really are going to help catch him?” the Marshal said. “From the way you’ve been going on about him, I figured you were going to nominate him for sainthood.”

“Can’t understand his real story until we meet him, now can we, Marshal?”

The Marshal left. The others finished their meal. Johnny filled them in on Jerry’s situation in Wichita and about the trip.

“Jerry would love to be a part of this case, you know.”

“As I recall, you and I solved a few cases together before he arrived,” Doc said. “I just imagine we will handle this one as well.”

“I was not impugning (putting down) your astuteness (cleverness) in disentangling (solving) challenging conundrums (puzzles) such as this. I just like having another kid around.”

“Two things,” Doc said. “Your rhetoric (use of words) has become incomprehensible to any average mortal. And, I for one, am still a kid inside my cranium (skull).”

“I love it when we go on like that,” Johnny said beaming from one to another. It has become one of the things I really treasure about you folks – expanding my vocabulary and with it the things I know about.”

“And we, you,” Cilla said.

“Now, if we are done with this session of accolades and encomiums (compliments) we need to get to work on a plan, preferably using English everybody will understand,” Doc said.

“Two things come to mind immediately for me,” Johnny said. “First, if that valise was filled with one dollar bills it could hold up to \$21,000. I can’t imagine anybody carrying any more

than that with him. Five dollar bills would boost it to over \$100,000 (nearly three million in today's currency). So, assuming it was ones and not fives, why ones? If he had converted it into five-dollar bills, it would have weighed less than ten pounds and would have fit in a very small case. It would have been much easier to manage in every way."

Johnny continued.

"I'm thinking he wasn't going to use it to buy a store. I'm thinking he was running away with a lot of money. Therefore, he wouldn't have wanted to stick out when he spent the money – only having the large, five dollar bills – so he kept to the smaller ones.

"Then, second, there is C.B. He was like just the opposite – he must have wanted to stand out in people's memories from the clothes he chose to wear. It was like a message that said, 'Look at me and don't forget me'. He didn't want people to think he was just some run of the mill thief.

"Any of that make sense to you 'old kids'?"

Johnny grinned.

Doc spoke.

"It does. I suppose there could be other explanations as well, but, yes, what you say makes sense."

The Marshal re-entered the restaurant and went directly to Doc's table.

"You'll never believe this," he said.

"You know you shouldn't set up challenges like that for me, Marshal," Johnny said. "Let's see, if it's something I would never believe then I must consider something fully improbable or coincidental that relates to our recent conversation. With that as a starting point and the sheets of paper in your hand I will say that the same stage that C.B. just robbed was carrying the wanted poster that detailed his most recent escapades."

"Amazing. Irritating, but amazing," the Marshal said as he placed the sheets on the table and took a seat.

The waitress brought him a new mug of coffee. It was

just understood, there, that the Marshal's first nickel cup of coffee each morning extended to cover 'refills' all day long.

Johnny scanned down the wanted poster with a sigh and slumped back in his chair.

"I guess I didn't witness his first holdup after all. How inconsiderate of him."

## CHAPTER TWO

The wanted poster listed three holdups – two other stage coaches and a lone rider on the trail just beyond the railhead south of Red Bend. In each case, he had taken only one thing from one person. No one had ever been harmed. He had been described variously as ‘The Polite Bandit’, ‘The Gentleman Highwayman’, and ‘The Masked Marauder’.

“I think the Crimson Bandit is a whole lot classier, don’t you?” Johnny asked/stated after the Marshal had left again.

“I don’t know,” Doc said teasing. “I like the Marauder thing myself.”

“Not that it seems to matter one whit,” Cilla said, “but I’m with Johnny on this one. ‘Crimson’ presents a wonderfully vivid image that the others lack.”

“I can’t believe we are even having this discussion,” Doc said.

“We writers just approach things differently from you science guys, Doc,” Johnny said. “We possess a fantastic, built-in flair. No offence, but you’re not really the epitome (best example) of fashion.”

“That didn’t seem to be of any concern to you while I was so skillfully cutting that slug out of your chest last year at this time.”

“If you will recall, I was unconscious throughout the procedure. If I hadn’t been, I’m sure I would have had a comment.”

“I have no doubt about that! Since the moment you woke up that afternoon, I have come to understand that you are never without a comment!”

Cilla was used to the two of them going on and on about things, which under any other circumstances would have been considered fully unimportant to both of them. She waited.

“You done yet?” she asked at last.

They looked at each other.

“I think I’m done, Doc. What about you?”

“Yes. I believe that I’ve had my daily allotment of inane banter (crazy conversation).”

The three of them took a moment to enjoy each other’s smiles. Moments like that cemented their friendship and reaffirmed their commitment to one another.

“I wonder why there have been no articles about the robberies in the papers you receive from around the area, Cilla,” Johnny asked. “Or have there? I’ve been gone, I guess.”

“And I haven’t had time to read them. Seems by best volunteer typesetter ran out on me.”

Johnny beamed.

“You’ll have to look,” she said. “It is possible, though, that the victims have all been just passing through places, so they probably were long gone by the time the reporters heard about the situations.”

“You’d think the Sheriffs or Marshals would have given up the stories.”

“Most lawmen are not as cozy with the newspapers as Cal is. I’ll go ahead and contact a couple of editors, but I can’t promise much information. The lawmen will likely be the best sources of information.”

“I guess that calls for a visit with the Marshall, then,”

Johnny said.

He stood.

“He always seems to really enjoy my visits.”

“Emphasis on the ‘seems’,” Doc said, chuckling to himself.

Johnny ignored the comment and turned toward Cilla.

“If you were serious about buying my breakfast, thank you. If not, tell the waitress I’ll drop off some money later. I need to catch Cal before he thinks he has something more important to deal with than my Crimson Bandit.”

Cilla and Doc noted the use of the word ‘my’. Clearly the boy had adopted the outlaw as his own personal concern.

“So, Marshal, I assume you are going to contact the other lawmen to get details about the Crimson Bandit. It’s alright if you want to use that name I’ve given him, by the way. I have no intention of filing for a copyright on it.”

“One more thing you won’t believe this morning,” the Marshal said.

“That you have already done made those contacts? Good work, Marshal. Shall I wait at the telegraph office for responses?”

“Would it matter if I said ‘no’?”

“Probably not. We seem to have a good understanding about things like that.”

“Scat. I have a desk full of paperwork to get after, here.”

“See you later. I will keep you informed as the wires come in.”

The Marshal raised his hand and motioned him on his way. He loved the boy, but there were times when . . .

One telegram had already arrived. It was from the Sheriff down in Sandy Ford. Johnny read it as he returned next door to the Marshal’s office.

“Got a response from Sandy Ford. A stage holdup on the short run from the railhead into the town. The guy who

was robbed disappeared before preferring charges. Odd, I suppose, but not really if what had been stolen wasn't the man's property in the first place. Nothing about that here. Same Crimson accouterments (accessories) as my guy."

"Your guy?"

"Think of it as shorthand for, 'the gentleman dressed in crimson who pilfered the valise from the non-communicative, rotund man with whom the beautiful lady and I were sharing the stagecoach.'"

"Must say I prefer the shorthand," the Marshal said. "Several things in common that are obvious, I suppose. The man on the stage with you also left without filing any charges. You may just have something there about the stolen property not really being the property of the victims."

"I'll go wait for the rest of the telegrams – three in all, correct?"

"Right."

The others were carbon copies of the first – no charges filed and the victim disappeared – left town – immediately. Johnny took it upon himself to respond with telegrams of his own to the three sheriffs, asking for the names of the victims and any information about where they were from, and such. He thought he had kept it all on the up and up by signing them, "JB for Marshal Calvin".

Johnny was a master at pushing the very fine lines between acceptable and unacceptable, legal and illegal, right and wrong. He never sought personal gain when doing that – just figured it was an effective way to cut through the nonsense, which in the end would be overlooked by everybody anyway. It usually worked.

He informed the Marshal what he had done. Cal raised his eyebrows but didn't comment. Johnny spoke as if an afterthought.

"Oh, yes. There is a telegram from the Marshal that covers the territory out by Colby. There is no general store for sale out there or in any of the other little places nearby. Nice going, by the way, Marshal, for getting that inquiry out so

quickly.”

“Seems I spend lots of time doing things to keep you off my back, son. That does raise suspicions about the man on the stage.”

“Confirms, not raises. Technically, I already raised the suspicion.”

The Marshal nodded not going to get sucked into such a discussion about who had done what, when.

“I need to get on home,” Marshal. “Aunt Bea will begin to be concerned if I don’t show up soon. I telegraphed her saying I’d arrive on the stage today. She knows it’s often hours late, but if she was looking she’d have seen the trail of dust it kicked up just south of our place as we approached Red Bend.”

He left and stopped at Cilla’s where he borrowed copies of the latest papers she had received from around the area. Back outside he shed his shirt and set an easy trot toward his ‘little’ house just outside of Red Bend. He was there in a matter of ten minutes. It was a wonderful sight. He was somewhat surprised that was his reaction, but accepted the feelings with a smile.

“Aunt Bea,” he began calling while still fifty yards from the front door.

She was immediately out onto the porch drying her hands on her apron. It was a long hug followed by a plate of cinnamon rolls and a quart of milk as they sat across from each other at the kitchen table. He filled her in on the trip, providing details he knew she would enjoy, but which the others in his life wouldn’t have. It took thirty minutes and four rolls – about par for that kind of thing between them.

He kept the mention of the robbery until last, not wanting to disturb her right off. He knew it would be frightening to her – even after the fact like that – since it so closely resembled the tragedy on the stagecoach upon which their relationship had been established the previous summer.

Before he had left with Jerry, the two of them had cut a month’s worth of firewood and had it neatly piled up against



the house. He took time to restock the stacks inside by the fireplace and oven.

Diablo was clearly happy to see him. Johnny swung himself up onto his back and they spent a half hour galloping the meadow bareback. They stopped at the creek for a swim before they returned to the stable. Johnny felt better knowing the dust and grime from the long stage ride had been washed away.

There was still time before supper so he settled back on his bed with the newspapers and began going through them with some care. He found several articles. Each reported pretty much a duplicate of what he had experienced. How two of the reporters could have mistaken the bandit's brilliant crimson togs (clothing) for merely 'red' disturbed him, but he moved on. Names of two of the victims were included, one article saying it had been found on the stage manifest (list of passengers). Johnny wondered if the victims had, for some reason, been unwilling to provide their names outright. More and more it was coming to look like something peculiar was in play.

He noticed another thing; the robberies had all taken place within twenty-five miles of Red Bend – west, south, and east. He wondered if that might indicate Red Bend was the center of the bandit's operations. He'd have to ask if any strangers had come to town recently. Or, he thought, perhaps the bandit might be somebody who had lived right there in town all along.

He began considering the local possibilities – men over six feet, with deep voices, broad shoulders, who were between the ages of thirty and forty. Several came to mind – one of them the pastor at the community church, one a new bar tender at the saloon, and another, the Marshal's newest deputy.

After his favorite of all suppers (his aunt knew how to welcome him back home) – ham, green beans, corn on the cob, fresh baked rolls, and peach pie for dessert – he scooted Aunt Bea off to her rocker to read while he did up the dishes. The long stage ride had given him lots of time to think about

his life and he had come to see more clearly how fortunate he was to have Bea as his 'parent substitute'.

That had come into focus when he began making comparisons between the family friends he visited in Kansas City and the people he had come to know in Red Bend. Neither set could be considered 'bad' people – that wasn't the point – but the city folks just didn't seem to understand what was really important in life. They were into bragging about all the expensive stuff they had, and promotions they had received at work, and awards they had won and powerful city and state committees on which they sat. He seldom heard anything from them that indicated they understood that being and living among good, caring, helpful, honest people is what really makes life wonderful. What good was a thousand dollars if nobody loved you, or you had nobody to love or care for, or your safety was continually in jeopardy (in danger)? They just didn't get it in the city and Johnny understood there was a good chance he would have been growing up with those same scary, selfish, values if his life hadn't taken such an extraordinary twist.

He fully understood that he was not an easy child to raise. He was strong minded, tended to act on his own without permission, questioned most everything until convinced it was right or appropriate, and tended to get easily exasperated (really annoyed) with people who acted in stupid ways because they were less intelligent than he was (which often seemed to be most everybody).

Aunt Bea was a good balance for him. She was exceedingly patient, fair minded and made sure she had all the facts before she reacted or made a decision about Johnny or his requests. She trusted her nephew in all of the truly important ways and gave him a lot of freedom in which to explore all aspects of life and growing into it. Oh, she was constantly worried about him, but all good parents keep their concern about their children's welfare close to the front of their minds. She understood Johnny, like most young people, learned best from personal experience and that meant making and correcting his own mistakes. She just hoped those mistakes would never be beyond his ability to handle.

He decided to begin writing a story. He didn't know if he would ever finish it – that wasn't even important. Johnny just loved to write – to play with words and to bring his ideas and mental images to life on a sheet of paper for others to experience. He didn't even care if his readers liked what he wrote. It was the process of writing that he valued.

He got paper and pencils and made himself comfortable at the table close to his aunt.

“I'm going to begin another story. It will be about the Crimson Bandit. Since I don't know how the case will end up, I have no idea what path the story will follow. It may tell the real story or, like I did with the Pony Express story, it may just turn into plain old fiction.”

“I'll be eager hear portions of it when you're ready to share them with me.”

Johnny grinned and passed her the sheet from the table in front of him. She read it out loud.

“The Mystery of the Crimson Bandit, by Johnny Baker.”

The remainder of the sheet was blank.

She looked at him over the top of her glasses.

“The excitement is almost too much for an old heart like mine.”

She handed it back. Smile met smile. Johnny wanted to tell her he loved her – something he had never done in so many words. In a way, he figured, they had both just said that to each other. He got down to work. Cilla's advice to him as a young writer had been to just put something down on paper to begin with. There would be time later to refine it and clean it up or even change it altogether if that seemed called for. Taking her at her word, he began.

\* \* \*

The stagecoach, drawn by four powerful horses – a white, a brown, a black and a gray – moved down the narrow road at an easy pace. There were still fifteen miles to cross before they came to the next town and the heat had tired the team.

The bright orange sun looked large in the cloudless sky above. The day was sweltering hot and that area of Kansas had not been blessed with so much as the hint of a breeze for a full month. The dust, which was lifted into the air by the tall, narrow, iron rimmed, wheels, dropped immediately back onto the road as if eager to return to its comfortable place on the hard-packed mud surface below.

Inside, there were three passengers – a beautiful lady who smelled wonderful, a fat old man who didn't and was plainly irritated when spoken to, and a handsome young man with a wonderful smile – a relatively young teenager who, although he usually enjoyed new experiences found himself bored out of his skull during what had become a very long and tiring ride.

Suddenly, the sound of a six shooter rang out – a single shot. The stage shook as the driver flicked the whip over the backs of the horses to urge them to pick up their pace.

A second and third shot were heard. The stage slowed and stopped. The boy looked out the window. There he was, sitting tall in the saddle astride a beautiful, black horse. He was dressed in black and crimson with a narrow black mask covering his eyes and nose. Without any doubt, it was the Crimson Bandit!

\* \* \*

Johnny had been writing for nearly half an hour. He handed the sheets to his Aunt.

“Want coffee?” he asked, standing.

“It's been on the stove all day. Probably thick as mud, but sure. Thank you. Then just pour out any that's left.”

Johnny poured and delivered. Aunt Bea read, nodding and smiling. He figured those were good signs. Although he wrote for his own benefit, he had to admit it was nice when other's liked it as well.

Aunt Bea removed her glasses and handed the sheets back to Johnny.

“You continue to amaze, me, Johnny. At your age I was still having difficulty making subjects and predicates (nouns

and verbs) agree in number and here you are painting beautiful pictures with words I didn't even know existed back then. Doc's hopes to the contrary, I think writing is your calling."

"Thanks. I suppose I could be both – a doctor and a writer. I guess that's one of the wonderful adventures that still lies out in front of me."

Aunt Bea just nodded. For some reason, she wiped a tear away from the corner of her eye. Johnny looked away. He didn't know why, but he always looked away in that situation. He wasn't sure if it was because it embarrassed him or if he thought the woman – and it was always a female – would be embarrassed if she thought he saw it. Both Doc and the Marshal had cautioned him not to be upset that he didn't understand lots of things about women – that's just the way it was. He still wasn't convinced about that, but at least their comments – presumably based on real experiences – offered some comfort.

Johnny wanted to get an early start back in town the next morning, so he made ready to go to his room for the night. His aunt was still reading. At the door to his room he paused and looked back at her.

"I love you, Aunt Bea."

She rested the book in her lap and looked up.

"I love you, too, Johnny. It's wonderful having you back home all safe and sound. Good night."

He went on into his room. He knew she'd be crying over his remark – he had become good at predicting such things even if he didn't understand them. Interestingly, he thought, he felt very good inside after that brief exchange. Then, he had to smile. It felt really good to have made a woman cry – now that just didn't make any sense at all!

Over breakfast – his first breakfast – he related some things about his time in Kansas City that he had forgotten to tell her the night before.

He and Diablo were on their way at a full gallop by six-thirty. The sun was already fully visible above the eastern

horizon and was rapidly raising the temperature from the welcome cool that had been allowed by the darkness of night. The moon was still faintly visible in the western sky. He wondered how that could be – sun and moon hanging around up there at the same time. Surely there was a book either in the school library or in Doc's bedroom that would explain that. He made a mental note to look into it.

He met his three grownup cohorts (buddies) at the restaurant. Actually, he met the Marshal on the sidewalk and followed him inside. They were all soon engaged in conversation.

“So, you have this ‘Red Robber’ case solved yet?” the Marshal asked, having intentionally called the wrong name just to torment the boy a bit.

Johnny understood and ignored the comment.

“I'm closing in on it. Just a few details left to work out.”

“Oh? Just a few? Like what details?”

“Who it is, where he lives, why he's doing what he's doing, things like that.”

“I suppose you'll have it all wrapped up by this afternoon, then,” the Marshal came back with a smile, which was really directed more at the others than Johnny.

“I may need until the end of the week. Doc once told me that the most important part in medical diagnosis was asking the right questions. I think that applies here as well. In this case that question seems to be that last one – why is he doing what he's doing?”

“I'm thinking first, though, we need to know about the booty he's pilfering – the loot he's robbing. If it turns out – as I suspect it will – to be money that the victims came by in some illicit (dishonest) fashion, then we could be looking for somebody who is out to set wrongs, right. Like a vigilante, I guess. It would be somebody who believes working through the legal system has failed or cannot be counted on to work so he's taking it upon himself to administer justice. He would know he is risking being legally liable for his extra-legal (outside the limits of the law) acts.”

“If that turns out to be correct, it is a person more focused on just righting the wrong than on punishing the criminal,” Doc said. “So far it would seem he is only interested in regaining the money and not in harming the offender. I have to wonder what he may be doing with the ‘booty’ as you referred to it.”

“Good points, Doc.”

Johnny turned to the others.

“That’s why I keep him around, you know. Always known for a fresh perspective on things.”

“And here I thought you kept me around so I’d buy you breakfast.”

“Well, that, too. I could buy my own, you know, but I understand how much it means to you to take care of the adorable, little ragamuffin whose life you saved.”

### CHAPTER THREE

After breakfast (Doc paid) Johnny accompanied the Marshal to the telegraph office. The 'JB for Marshal Calvin' wires had all been answered. There was a new one from the sheriff in Great Bend to the west.

"That may clinch it," Johnny said as they entered the Marshal's office."

"That what may clinch what?" he asked tossing his hat onto the peg on the wall behind his desk.

"That Red Bend is the Crimson Bandit's center of operation. There are now incidents on all sides of us. That reminds me, have there been any new 30 to 40-year-old men come to town to stay in the last month or so?"

"I don't check family Bibles when folks come to town." [In those days, most babies were born at home and their birthdates were entered alongside their names on a page at the front of the family Bible. It was recognized as a legal certificate of birth.]

Johnny understood, but figured Cal could do much better than that.

"I won't hold you to the exact age thing, you know."

"Even in that case, I really can't think of anybody. Could be some farm or ranch hands I don't know about. There is



Will, the new bar tender at the saloon – he took Ken’s place. He worked there six or so years ago, and just returned to town so I wouldn’t count him as new, I suppose. Bar tenders tend to learn everybody’s secrets so he might know things about any newcomers that might help us. Just stay out of there when there are men at the bar.”

Johnny nodded and understood that it had been an order he was expected to follow. He would.

They read the new telegrams. The man who had been robbed on the stage at Sandy Branch was named Lawrence Anderson, early thirties, slightly built, said he was a jewelry salesman. He reported that he had lost several thousand dollars’ worth of rings, bracelets and necklaces in a small leather case.

The lone rider that had been held up was Carl Dawson, also in his thirties. He said his cash had been taken, but didn’t state how much. The bandit had taken his saddlebags in which he said he carried his wallet when traveling. Interestingly, the bandit knew just what to take without asking.

The new victim from near Great Bend was Donald Kunz, driving a wagon and team, and was in his fifties. He reported money stolen as well. No amount was revealed.

“You find out anything more about the man on my stagecoach,” Johnny asked.

“He was close mouthed when I talked with him. Stage manifest named him as Cedrick Blau. Folks on the run can use any name they want to, of course, so, if you are correct about the victims all being bad guys, none of the names may be real.” [There were no such things as official ‘ID cards’ back then.]

“I hadn’t thought about that. I think we can believe the man on my stage.”

“Why’s that?”

“There were initials on his valise – CB.”

“That could really stand for Carl Burton, or Charles Benson, as well as Cedrick Blau, you know.”

Johnny nodded and followed up with his own thoughts.

“And taking that a step further, he could have used a name that had the same initials to keep from making things seem suspicious.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“So, take your name for example, Cal Calvin, could really be Colorado Cooper.”

“I don’t have anything with initials on it.”

“And here I thought I was close to catching the notorious Colorado Kid, all grown up.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Just the response I’d expect from the Kid when he wanted to cover his tracks.”

“Why don’t you and your run-away imagination go visit Cilla? She actually seems to appreciate it.”

“I’ll go, and thanks for the help with getting the information. By the way, is Cal your real first name or is that short for Calvin?”

“Mine to know and yours to find out. And, I know I will regret having said that.”

Johnny moved on across the street wearing a lingering, broad smile. Another mystery had just fallen into his lap. He figured he could solve it with one simple question to Cilla, but that would have to wait.

“Need to have you write a few things down, please, before my brain loses them within its sheer brilliance.”

They both understood it was intended as humorous – even if probably quite accurate. Cilla took out paper and pencil ready to write as Johnny closed his eyes and dictated from the images still freshly floating inside his head.

“Lawrence Anderson, Sandy Branch stage, a case full of jewelry stolen.

“Carl Dawson, lone rider west of town, wallet in saddlebags.

“Donald Kunz, wagon headed into Great Bend, money

in a strong box.

“Cedrick Blau – my stage – lots of money in a valise.

“Cal Calvin, suspicious first name. Got anything on that for me?”

Cilla stopped writing once she understood what Johnny was doing with his last statement.

“On Cal’s first name? I just always figured it was a nickname derived from his last name – Calvin. Never thought about asking, I guess. Why is that important to you?”

“Because it’s something I don’t know. Everything I don’t know is important to me. Have you not been paying attention these past twelve months that I’ve been underfoot?”

Cilla let it pass with a smile and asked:

“Are these notes I made, for you or me?”

“How about for us and you keep them?”

Cilla nodded and placed the sheet in the middle drawer of the big table at which she worked.

“I’m off to see if Will, the new bartender, will give me something,” Johnny said trying to keep a straight face.

“What?”

“Information. Give me information. Seems I had you going there for a few seconds.”

“I know Will from a few years back. He’s a good man. A boy your age would never get a drop of alcohol from him. Did you know that he doesn’t drink, himself?”

“An odd characteristic for a Bar Keep – unique and fascinating, even.”

Cilla had question.

“What sort of information, if I may ask, and apparently, I can since I just did.”

“That remark shows that you’ve been spending way too much time with Doc and me.”

“You’re not asking for a divorce, are you?” Cilla said with a soft smile.

“See, there you go again. I love absurd humor, or more correctly, humor based on absurdity (ridiculousness).”

“Back to my question,” Cilla said.

“Oh, yes, information he may have picked up from customers that relates to the Crimson Bandit’s exploits. I’m not even sure what sorts of things I’m looking for at this point. Like the Marshal says, people tell their secrets to their bartender – a lot like to a doctor in that way, I suppose.”

As was his custom when approaching the saloon, he entered through the alley door. Frank, the owner wasn’t in his office so Johnny made his way right into the main room out front as if he had been given permission. There was a different man behind the bar from the one Johnny knew – Ken. He assumed that would make him, Will. He approached the man, hand out for a shake.

“I’m Johnny. You must be the Will, Marshal Calvin and Cilla at the newspaper told me about. Marshal said I could stay until some paying customers arrived. You got a minute?”

“Got lots of minutes this early in the day. Good to have company. That was very skillful the way you just made it seem legitimate for you to be in here. Something on your mind?”

“Aside from my hat, you mean?”

Will smiled and nodded. Johnny liked him immediately. The feeling seemed to be mutual. Johnny removed his hat and sat it on the stool beside him.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard about the series of robberies by a lone highwayman who I’ve come to call the Crimson Bandit. I’m a writer in the making and I’ve started a story about him and his exploits. One of the things I’m trying to do is get inside his head, you might say – to understand what he’s thinking, why he’s doing what he’s doing.”

“I have heard some things, yes. So, you’re looking for tidbits to add color and authenticity to the piece you are creating, is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, and may I say you just said it much better than I did.”

“I like to play with words. My daddy was a preacher. He used to tell me, ‘Will, never use a penny word when you can use a nickel word’.”

“Meaning the so-called big words – the nickel words – are more precise and meaningful than the little words – the penny words.”

“Right. I can tell you have a nickel head on those shoulders of yours.”

“My mother was a teacher and my father a newspaper editor. I had little chance to be anything else, I suppose. One question, though. I’d think many of the folks you talk to wouldn’t know a lot of nickel words – drifters and cowhands for example. If you want to be understood, I’d think you’d have to use penny words.”

“The people who speak to me are mostly into talking, not listening. They don’t pay much attention to what I say, so I can regale them with the longest multi-syllabic words Mr. Webster’s dictionary has to offer and it will never interfere with what is transpiring between us.”

Johnny smiled and nodded, acknowledging Will’s intentional word play.

“I’d make a terrible bar tender, then.”

“Why’s that?”

“I believe I have important things to say so I always hope people pay attention to me. I know they often don’t – since I’m still just a kid. It’s one reason I want to write stories – so people will spend time thinking about the things that I say – that I write – well, you understand.”

Will nodded and spoke.

“Up to this point, I have nothing to offer you, I’m afraid, but I will certainly keep an ear out for information related to the robberies. What did you call this vigilante?”

“The Crimson Bandit, because he accents his basically black outfit and horse with Crimson accouterments – shirt, boots, leather, hat band.”

“Interesting. I wonder how he would feel about that

moniker (nickname).”

“I suppose if he offers an alternative, I’ll know he doesn’t like it.”

Johnny spread a wide grin. It was reflected by Will’s own.

“Well, thanks for your time. I’ll check back with you from time to time if that’s alright – I don’t mean to be a pest. Well, sometimes I do, but not in this case.”

Will chuckled at the boy’s babbling.

Johnny left. He had really missed his horse, Diablo, during the eight days he had been gone, so he decided to spend the rest of the morning riding. He understood that Diab had missed him as well. Whenever he was outside at home, the horse followed him everywhere, as if to never let him leave again. Johnny had a humorous vision of starting to walk down the lane toward town, Diablo coming after him and picking him up by the seat of his pants and returning him back to the stable. That might be the basis for an entertaining kid’s story. He’d tuck the idea away.

At the livery, Johnny checked with Harry, the owner, to see if there was anything he could help with, since Jerry was gone for the summer. He said he had things under control and thanked him. Johnny took a few minutes to fill him in on the house, the people, and the activities Jerry was experiencing in Wichita. Harry clearly appreciated the information.

“I expect there will be a letter for you soon. Jerry is very fond of you, you know.”

Harry nodded and his lower lip quivered. Seemed like he was making everybody he met want to cry since he got home. (Sometimes Johnny’s brain exaggerated the true situation.)

He and Diablo headed north along the trail that led to the Mill that had figured so centrally in the kidnapping of his Aunt Bea a few months earlier. As he came alongside the huge old stone and wood building, he paused and looked it over for a few minutes before urging Diablo on. He had

wondered how he would react to seeing it again. He had no particular emotion attached to it. Whatever frightening things had gone on there were clearly a part of his past. He figured that was probably good. It just wouldn't do to be frightened into wetting his pants every time he saw a sack of flour.

The Marshal and Doc had talked about a waterfall a short distance on north of the mill. He thought it would be a good time to check it out. Other than for the kidnapping adventure, Johnny really had not spent much time north west of Red Bend.

He could see that the terrain became more rolling in the distance to the west – along the creek he figured. They headed in that direction at an easy gallop. Diablo was just not into moving any slower that morning.

Ten minutes later the creek came into view. It was narrower there than it had been downstream by the collapsed bridge. Many, large, jagged, rocks jutted out of the low hills that made up its steeper banks. They caused the water to run an irregular path producing an angry looking frothy, white, churning, surface in contrast to the wider, placid (calm) stream below the bridge.

Johnny assumed they were north of the falls so set a slow pace back toward the south, enjoying the sound of the gurgling water as it rushed south alongside him.

Presently, he heard tumbling water that indicated the falls was close by. Nothing else sounded just like that – some combination of the dull rumble of distant thunder and the splashing of water leaving the mouth of the pump in the yard back home.

Diablo picked his way carefully down the steep slope. It was also sprinkled with large rock formations, which hugged the creek and formed the low precipice (cliff) from which the water fell.

From below, Johnny could view the falls from top to bottom and side to side. The creek was squeezed by the narrow, rock, opening so its water rushed on its way over the drop in a thick, bubbly, white wall. It splashed in irregular plumes as it danced off the rocks in the wide pool below. In

the morning sun the mist produced a constant rainbow arching from the lower left up toward the top at the right.

Although all of that was quite nice – beautiful even – Johnny was really interested in what Doc had told him sat behind the falling water – the opening of a cave.

It became one of those should he or shouldn't he, quandaries (problems). On the shouldn't side was the really rapid fall of water, which he was certain would produce a huge amount of pressure – weight – on anybody trying to move through it. That could lead to being swept into the pool that contained and calmed the water after it fell. He was a strong swimmer so he decided that would not pose a problem should it occur. On the should side was the discovery of what lay inside – gold, silver, diamonds, everything his wild imagination could conger up. Even though it would most likely be just plain old slimy rock, the vision of gold, silver and diamonds seemed to add more legitimacy to the act and greater motivation to proceed without extreme caution.

Prior to that discussion that had just taken place inside his head, he had really already known that he had every intention of entering, but just having taken the time to have it made him feel like a more responsible person. (Others in his life would likely argue that point!)

He urged Diablo close to the water and allowed him to drink before guiding him back north the twenty yards to the water fall. They stopped to look things over. The wall of water was so thick and powerful he really couldn't see through it. That didn't seem necessary – Doc had said the cave was there so the cave was there. The only problem he saw was that since the sheet of falling water was some ten feet wide, where along it should he look for the opening. Was it also ten feet wide? He doubted that.

“I can enter from this end and work my way across to the left until I locate it.”

He dismounted and told Diablo to wait for him. He had no real concern that he wouldn't – as long as he understood the situation. He checked his pockets for things that might be ruined if they got wet. He found nothing like that. From his



saddle bags, he removed a six inch candle with a well waxed wick so that presented no water related problem. He also selected several matches. He figured if he held the heads tightly covered in a fist, they had a good chance of remaining dry. He removed his boots and socks, grasped the matches, took a deep breath, and moved into the falling water.

Partly, it was like he expected – a very powerful stream hammering away at his head and shoulders, which made it difficult to maintain his balance. In another way, things were nothing like what he had envisioned it would be back there. Behind the thick sheet of water there was a depression that extended several feet into the rock – an area sheltered from the falling water by a shelf above. A considerable amount of light filtered in through the water and he immediately spied the opening to the cave.

The entrance was not small, as he had figured it would be. It was six feet high and nearly four feet wide. He stuck his head inside. As his eyes adjusted to the low level of light he could make out the general setting. It seemed safe. He turned toward the water and, mounting a voice he hoped would be loud enough to be heard over the roar of the falls, reassured Diablo that he was fine. He didn't want him to figure something had happened to him so he would leave for home.

Diablo whinnied in response. Johnny smiled. He did have a remarkable horse – of course the horse also had a remarkable boy. He chuckled out loud about that.

Standing in the opening to the cave he felt a breeze moving into the cave from around the edges of the waterfall. He figured that meant there was an opening inside that somehow worked to suck at the air like a chimney.

He entered and opened his hand to examine the matches. They were soaked. So much for the waterproof capabilities of a tightly clinched fist. Because of the constant flow of air, the walls were relatively dry. The low level of illumination allowed him to make out things three or four yards into the cave.

One thing immediately puzzled him. There were the

remains of a small fire, and more than that, there was a sizeable stack of wood nearby.

“This place has recently been used by somebody,” he said out loud, straining to see further into the cave.

He bent over and put his palm close to the spent fire. It was cold, but did still have some unburned twigs around the edge. He collected several, took out his knife and shredded them into splinters that should be easy to light from sparks. He struck the butt of his knife against the rock wall and sparks flew. He soon had a very small fire going. His aim was not to build it up, but just to have a flame from which to light the candle. That was easily accomplished.

He moved toward the rear of the cave. It made a sharp turn to the west, clearly leaving the course of the creek up above. The roar of the falls immediately lessened. The cave, which had been twelve feet wide just inside the opening, narrowed to eight. It continued for another ten yards before narrowing to a mere crevice that was far too small for him to fit through.

He had come upon several odd things – well, actually more interesting than odd to Johnny. There was a partial bale of hay, a gunny sack, which contained oats, and a bedroll. It only added to his previous conclusion that someone had been using the cave as a place to stay – and he had apparently not left for good since things were left behind.

Unless that person was into feasting on hay and oats it suggested a horse was also involved. The bedroll suggested just one person. The stash of firewood suggested the person was planning ahead for his return, hopeful, perhaps that a rain would bring some relief to the parched ground outside. That further suggested somebody with meaningful ties to the immediate area. The lack of human food suggested a person who was not really hiding – he had to go out in public to get food. That very likely also suggest he had money to purchase such things.

Why live in a cave if he had money he could use for a hotel room? Johnny had no immediate answer, but figured it might be that crucial (most important) question that Doc

insisted was so necessary if you were to make genuine progress toward the solution to any problem – medical or otherwise.

He had seen all there seemed to be to see. He made sure the little fire he had started was out and he stirred its ashes in with those left from the other person's fire. He didn't want to leave behind any trace of his visit.

He approached the opening and made ready to leave. His wet clothing, coupled with the light breeze, had given him quite a chill. He wondered how the other occupant handled that. He had probably removed his clothes before entering and carried them in some sort of waterproof container or wrap.

He smiled to think he was complaining about being chilly on the hottest day the summer had seen so far. People were strange beings. He felt bad for folks who couldn't smile about their own 'strangeness'. Johnny prized and valued his – those unique qualities that made him Johnny Baker, different from every other human being who had ever lived or whoever would live. How special was that!

## CHAPTER FOUR

As he rode back to town he had several mysteries to think about. Perhaps the summer was not going to be so boring after all.

There was, of course, the Crimson Bandit – who he was, where he was, why he did what he did, and what happened to the loot he took? Suddenly, there was the mystery of who was using the cave as a place to stay – again, who and why. It probably wasn't anything that would seem worth a second thought to anybody but Johnny. And, third, what was the Marshal's first name. Johnny figured Cal thought that would be fairly difficult to find out or he wouldn't have set it up like a challenge. On the other hand, perhaps he set it up as a challenge in order to distract him from being so involved in the Crimson Bandit case. One of his 'get the boy out from under foot' tactics that Johnny had seen before.

He set himself two tasks for the afternoon. First, to go through the Marshal's tall stack of wanted posters, hoping to find some connection with the folks who had been the victims of the Crimson Bandit. Second, to expand his reading of the newspapers to find anything that might help locate the Bandit or provide some kind of information about the victims.

He joined Doc at lunch. The other two had been there and left already.

“One of the big questions here is to find out how the Bandit knows when people will be coming in this direction carrying some valuable cargo that they obtained illicitly,” Johnny said for starters.

“I even think I followed that,” Doc said with a smile. “Why are you so certain the victims are bad guys? Do you have any real proof?”

“No real proof, like a judge would require, but I’m working on that. It isn’t as if the carriers of the things that have been stolen would have advertised they had it on them – none of them carried signs saying, ‘I’m loaded here. Come and rob me’. Yet, somebody had to know and somehow that information had to get to the Bandit.”

“Accepting your shaky premise – that those who have been robbed were robbed of things that weren’t rightly theirs – your ideas seem reasonable. You have to understand, however, that many of those people may have begun their journeys far from the spot at which they were robbed.”

“What an outstanding idea,” Doc. “At least for those who were riding stagecoaches, we should be able to find out where they started their trip by examining the stage line’s passenger manifests, right?”

“Well, I suppose so, especially if they were riding clear though from beginning to end on one ticket. If they intentionally changed routes to disguise the nature of their trip then it might take a bit more doing – more tickets and more manifests.”

Johnny nodded acknowledging Doc’s clarification and how it really complicated matters, but went on.

“Those who were traveling on their own will present a different sort of challenge. I don’t have any good ideas about tracing their movements, yet.”

Johnny switched the subject to something closer to Doc’s real area of expertise.

“Tell me – in five minutes – all about diabetes militias (now called Type Two Diabetes).”

Doc raised his bushy eyebrows.

“I won’t even ask why. As you know, I’m sure, that condition is characterized by the body’s inability to process glucose – sugar – properly. There is no cure although some possible short term treatments have been put forth – basically eat very little sugar and starch and lots of protein and fat. Unfortunately, it is fatal for virtually everybody who acquires the disease.” [It is now quite treatable for most people. Insulin or some chemical to increase or regulate insulin production in a person’s pancreas is often part of the treatment – along with special diet and exercise. Those things were not known or available during the first half of Johnny’s life.]

“How long can a person expect to live once it’s diagnosed?”

“Depends on how soon it is diagnosed, of course. If caught early on and treated, they may have as much as five or ten years. If not, it could be as little as a few months.”

“Symptoms?”

“Rapid weight loss, unquenchable thirst, frequent urination, unexplainable weakness and fatigue, prickling feeling and numbness in hands and feet, and slow healing of sores – often a fruity odor in their breath.”

Actually, Johnny had known those things and was just rechecking to make sure.

“You see many diabetes millets patients?”

“Thankfully, very few. The western diet is heavy on fat and protein (meat, fish, fowl, beans) and low on sugar – except at your Aunt Bea’s table. I declare, she stuffs your system so full of sugar that . . .”

“. . . that I just continue to grow into a sweeter and sweeter young human being,” Johnny said, subverting Docs comment to his own benefit.

Doc offered the appropriate smile and nod, but then suddenly became quite serious.

“You’re not concerned about you or your Aunt, are you – having diabetes, I mean?”

“No. Nothing like that. You know me. Just always

trying to expand my fund of knowledge.”

“Translation,” Doc said looking at the boy over the top of his glasses. “Johnny is up to something and he’s not going to say what.”

“Well, maybe that, too.”

He smiled and finished his bread pudding. One might think all bread pudding would be pretty much the same. His Aunt Bea’s bread pudding was great, but the cook at the restaurant had it beat in a dozen ways. (We won’t tell Aunt Bea!) Johnny suspected she added a tad of molasses to the traditional vanilla and cinnamon, but neither his beguiling (charming) smile nor puppy dog eyes had been able to coax the secret ingredient out of her. Johnny had taken to sprinkling a little molasses diluted in warm water over Diablo’s oats and he REALLY liked them that way. (Perhaps it was Diab who Johnny suspected of having diabetes mellitus!)

When they finished, Johnny slipped two, one dollar bills, under the table to Doc. (He didn’t want it known he had money.)

“Lunch is on me today – like a consultant fee you could say.”

“Like a ‘try to cover up whatever deception the boy is perpetrating (committing) fee’ is more like it. But thank you. I appreciate your generosity.”

“And I appreciate . . . well, you, Doc. It seems to be a difficult thing for men to tell each other. I told Aunt Bea I loved her last night. I think it made her feel really good. I was surprised at how great it made me feel. Not sure why I’m sharing that with you, Doc. Just too stupendous a feeling to keep all to myself, I guess, and you’ve always been my go to guy ever since I showed up bleeding all over your table last year.”

“I understand. I’m quite sure your Aunt has understood about your love all along, but it is always wonderful to hear the words – especially for women.”

Johnny understood that had been Doc’s way of saying he knew that Johnny loved him, but that between them – guys

– the words were not necessary. Doc had sealed it by reaching across the table and patting Johnny's arm while looking him straight in the eyes. A very nice way of saying, 'I love you,' Johnny decided. He could live with that. Again, all quite unexpectedly, his spirits soared.

It seemed to Johnny that he was still struggling to understand many of the dos and don'ts about being a man. He figured that given time they would all get straightened out. That wasn't to say he would just accept the traditional dos and don'ts as his own. It just meant that he would come to better understand what they were so he could decide for himself about them.

They walked across the street together and parted at the steps that led up to Doc's office. Johnny continued on a few more paces and entered Cilla's office on street level.

"I need to look through more back copies of the newspapers you receive from elsewhere in the state."

"You're in luck, then since a half dozen new editions just arrived by stage today. They're in the big chair. I figured you'd be calling for them."

"You mean I'm that predictable?"

"Only your first steps are predictable. From there Heaven only knows where that head of yours may take you."

"And what would my first steps always be?"

"Making sure you have all the correct facts before proceeding, and believe me, I'm not knocking that – it's laudable (praiseworthy). There would be a whole lot less misunderstanding and conflict in the world if everybody took that approach."

Johnny accepted the idea although he would certainly think it through more fully later on.

"Well, unless you have things for me to help with, I'll settle in for a long summer's read – that remark seemed far more humorous as it was forming in my head than it did once it tripped out across my tongue."

"That's why authors have the luxury of rewriting what



they first set down on paper.”

Johnny nodded thoughtfully and moved to the chair. As he picked up the first paper he remembered something he had meant to tell Cilla.

“Oh, by the way, I’m beginning another story. It’s about the Crimson Bandit – big surprise, I’m sure. Since I don’t yet know where the case will lead me I’m not able to share any parts of the story yet.”

“Well, I’ll certainly be eager to read it when you’re ready for me to see it. I’ve been wondering, though, when you give me something of yours to read, am I the first to see it?”

“Sometimes you are, although usually I make it run the gauntlet first (an extreme form of Indian punishment. Google or Bing the term for more details). That means Aunt Bea first, followed by Doc. Then you.”

“You leave out the Marshal?”

“I’ve found that what I write just tends to make him very nervous so I’ve stopped doing that.”

Cilla laughed out loud and went back to her writing, still shaking her head.

Johnny looked through the papers with great care not knowing what kind of articles might hold information he needed. Something in the paper from McPherson, Kansas made him take a second look.

**ANNOMOUS GIFT:** Jasper Masters, president of the local school board, says an envelope arrived by post (mail) which contained a considerable amount of money. A letter, also included, stipulated the money was to be used to purchase books for a combination school and city library and to add five dollars a month to the school teacher’s salary for the next five years.

Nobody associated with the school has any idea who the generous donor might be. Mr. Masters reports a special bank account has been set up and that the school board is seeking volunteers to serve on a committee to utilize the money in the manner in which the letter stipulated. Contact him if you are interested in helping in this important

undertaking.

Johnny borrowed paper and pencil and began making notes. He asked Cilla if she would try to find out just how much money had been in that gift. She wrote out a telegram to the editor of the paper. Johnny would have it sent later. He would need to get more money from his bank account since it was his doing and not hers.

He went to the back room and dug out previous issues of the McPherson Newspaper and began searching them for stories that might suggest anything about people there who had lost a significant amount of money – robberies or gambling or . . . he wasn't sure what else.

An hour later another article popped off a page at him. It was from an earlier edition.

**ROBBERIES:** On last Friday night, thirteen local businesses were robbed after they closed. Money and small items were taken. Mr. Smith reported many pieces of jewelry were stolen from his store in addition to the week's receipts. Gabe Burton, at the leather shop, reported all of his pieces of silver ornamentation were missing. The gunsmith says nearly 500 rounds of .44 and .45 caliber bullets were taken. The Sheriff is investigating.

The article had been in a paper dated early in April of that year. That placed it two months before. He would get the Marshal to see if he could find out the total value of the cash and merchandise that had been stolen. He made more notes.

Before it was time for a slab of Aunt Bea's pie, back home at three o'clock, he had run down several other similar coincidences in other papers – where loses had occurred and later money showed up to replace it – in two instances right back to the person from whom it had been taken.

Before heading home, he borrowed two saddle bags worth of wanted posters from the Marshal, with the promise to return them the next morning.

At home, he explained to his Aunt just what he was up

to – matching wanted men to the Crimson Bandit’s victims and seeing if he could put any of them in the vicinity of the towns he had discovered during his search of the newspapers.

“Sound very complicated,” she said.

“It is. Almost too much for this brain of mine to keep straight. I need a big slate board (the black, forerunner of chalk boards in schools).

“Well, I don’t have one of those, but how about stringing up a sheet. You can pin pieces of paper on it with the information you have and then rearrange them as you begin making sense of things.”

“You are brilliant as well as beautiful, Aunt Bea.”

They soon had the sheet hung against the wall between the door to her room and the door to Johnny’s room. Bea was a packrat and saved everything. She had a tall pile of neatly folded paper from the general store in which the meat and other items had been wrapped. She suggested he cut that into small pieces and use it instead of the expensive writing paper. (As if the boy really had to worry about ‘expensive’ anything.) He agreed.

Since he had no idea how to organize the bits and pieces of information he had assembled, he just spent the rest of the evening jotting things down on slips of paper – things that might later fall into place and seem relevant. In the end things seemed to sort themselves into four piles: Things about the Bandit, things about the victims, things about what was stolen and things about anonymous gifts and such. There was another pile that contained random items that didn’t really fit into the others.

At the end of the evening he had no real answers, but was convinced he was on the right track. Before turning in for the night he ran through the list of symptoms Doc had given him, questioning Aunt Bea about whether or not she had any of them. She did not. It is what he had thought, but Doc’s comments had made the inquisition (inquiry) seem like a good idea. He went to bed more relieved about it than he would have expected and was soon asleep.

He was awake before sunup with a busy mind that would not return to sleep. He pushed back against his headboard sitting up and began going through the wanted posters. He was looking for similarities to the victims of the Crimson Bandit's robberies. One bore more than a modest resemblance to the man who had been lifted of the jewels south of town. The Sandy Ford sheriff had responded to the Marshal's telegram with a description: early forties, tall and slender, balding, an unpleasant looking scar just in front of his left ear. That certainly described the man on the poster – James Butler from Wichita and points south. He was wanted in several jewel robberies in south eastern Kansas and south western Missouri. Why would he have been traveling into the Red Bend area from so far away? That made him also wonder why the fat man on his stagecoach had not taken the train, but instead was heading through Red Bend by coach. Johnny figured he was onto something. The lone rider was heading out of Great Bend to the west toward Red Bend as had the driver of the wagon with the strongbox.

By the time he smelled biscuits baking and hard bacon sizzling, he had paged through over two hundred posters. He was momentarily sad that there were so many bad people in the world. One theme seemed to bind many of them together – they had fought in the War Between the States (it was never officially called the Civil War the way it is referred to now) and had come through it as men who had been changed for the worse. Good boys (many of the soldiers on both sides were in their teens) had been exposed to horrific things during the war and they never seemed able to readjust to life back home. Both of his grandfathers had been killed in that war so it had left deep scars on his family. He tried to put those kinds of thoughts and feeling aside and went to join his aunt in the front room.

“Smells wonderful out here – like usual. In my house back in Kansas City, my room was upstairs and the kitchen aromas never found their way up there in the morning. I prefer how it is here. Can I help with anything?”

“Set the table, I guess. You'll be going into to town this morning, I suppose.”

“That is my plan, but if you need me here I don’t have to go.”

“No. Just going to say I’ll probably see you in there. We need to restock the larder (food supply). It seems food and supplies fly out of here a lot faster than they did back B.J.”

Johnny smiled.

“B. J. Before Johnny you mean?”

“Could be. I guess I think of it as Before Joy. You constantly bring joy into my life. I didn’t realize how empty it was until you arrived.”

“That goes in both direction, you know. I’ll hitch up the team and wagon before I leave and bring it around front.”

“You spoil me, Johnny.”

“Good, because that’s exactly my intention.”

He and Diablo were on their way at a full gallop by 6:45. He needed to return the posters to the Marshal’s office and see if the cook at the restaurant had any leftover bread pudding. He really wasn’t hungry enough for another breakfast.

‘The gang’ was all there at Doc’s table in the rear of the big room. The conversation came to an awkward halt as soon as he approached the table.

“So, talking about me, again, I take it. At least that shows very good taste in topics. Let’s see, was it about my sparkling personality, my good looks, my powerful and unique brain . . .?”

“More like the dangers your runaway imagination may be presenting for you – again!” the Marshal said, making no attempt to cover up the concern the grownups seemed to share.

“I appreciate your concern, but can assure you that with every passing month I am becoming a more cautiously thoughtful being, mostly thanks to you three – and Aunt Bea, of course. Have I thanked you for that?”

“Thanks, will come in the form of not getting yourself into another life-threatening pickle – with this Crimson Bandit

of yours,” Cilla said.

“Another pickle?” Johnny asked using an exaggerated tone as if to question the basis of their concern.

“Yes, another,” the Marshal went on – “most recently barely escaping a rope around your neck in the Pony Express case and getting yourself and your best friends filled full of lead during your Aunt’s kidnapping.”

“Oh, those pickles! You must remember those cases all involved really bad people. The Crimson Bandit is a nice man.”

“And you base that on the way he keeps firing bullets at people while holding up stages and riders and relieving them of their wealth?”

It had been the Marshal, again, of course.

Johnny shrugged, feeling certain that his own hunches were right even though he had virtually not a single shred of solid evidence on which to base that premise.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

Johnny had a question for those at the table.

“How well known is it that there is a cave behind the little waterfall up on Sunday Creek – isn’t that where you said it was?”

“If that was an attempt to appear uncertain about the location of the waterfall, which you know exists right where it exists, you failed,” Cilla said. “You are not dealing with a table full of dunces here, you know.”

“It would be interesting to see you diagram that first sentence,” Johnny said hoping to move the conversation back to his real point – finding out how widely its whereabouts was known?

Doc looked at Cilla and tried a serious answer.

“Just locals I suppose, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“It’s one of those things that would only be interesting to ten-year-old boys and it’s far enough from town to keep them away. So, it’s known about, but infrequently visited, I’d say.”

“Why are you interested?” the Marshal asked looking directly at Johnny.

Cal then turned his head and addressed the others.



“We will now hear the young man’s fully fabricated (made up) answer, carefully crafted to make us think it really holds no interest to him whatsoever, when, in fact, it is at the top of his to-do list this morning.”

As one, all three of them turned to look at Johnny waiting for his response.

“Such a suspicious lot. I’m quite sure my guardian, Aunt Bea, would not want me keeping company with such a non-trusting collection of humanity.”

He stood, flashed them his wonderful smile, and left to rummage the kitchen for left over bread pudding.

Ten minutes later he found himself and his tummy full of bread pudding, in the Marshal’s office waiting on Cal to get in from breakfast. He didn’t have to wait long.

“This wanted poster on James Butler. Sounds and looks a lot like the man who was robbed at Sandy Ford using the name Lawrence Anderson – right down to the scar by his ear. I’m thinking if we can capture him, we will be able to get some information that will help us find the Crimson Bandit.”

“Let me hear your thinking on it,” the Marshal said, scooting the boy out of his chair and taking a seat himself behind his desk.

Johnny hopped up to sit on the front edge of the desk and began.

“The answers to several questions are basic to learning the identity of the Bandit. One is, how could he have learned about the loot the victims had acquired. Another is how he knew when and where the victim would be with that loot so he could steal it. Another has to do with why they had all come so close to Red Bend making themselves available for the Crimson Bandit to rob them.”

“I see. Yes. Those do seem to be the important questions IF the Bandit’s victims are really thieves themselves – and I guess we haven’t anything more than your speculation to go on there, have we?”

“Well-considered speculation, I’d say.”

Johnny continued and passed along what he had put together from the various newspaper articles.

“So, you see, it seems to me if we could just get that Butler guy to spill his guts about things we would probably get some good leads.”

“I must admit you have made a very convincing argument, Johnny. Let me telegraph a few lawmen in the area and see if we can all step up the search for Butler.”

“He was riding the stagecoach from the railhead going north by way of Sandy Ford,” Johnny said. “That comes north to Red Bend and then west to Great Bend before heading back north east to Salina. If he had purchased a ticket that took him farther than Sandy Ford we may be able to track him down or at least track him back to where he stated from – I guess that would entail getting a look at the railroad passenger manifest, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ll get those telegrams out right away. You let me handle this, you hear me? Cats have nine lives, but boys don’t, and if you were a cat I’m imagining you’d have undoubtedly used them all up long ago.”

“Which, of course, only proves how really carefully I have lived my almost fourteen years.”

The Marshal raised his eyebrows and gave him the look that indicated he really meant business. Johnny would take the ‘suggestion’ under advisement – his own advisement.

The Marshal wasn’t finished.

“What’s really going on with those questions about the cave behind the falls?”

The question took Johnny by surprise. He thought he had handled it to everybody’s complete satisfaction earlier at the restaurant by avoiding it altogether. His brain – never at a loss for instant ideas – began spinning one on the fly.

“I think there is a great story in it. Like Cilla said, for ten-year-old boys. All about an orphan trying to make it on his own. He lives off the land, hunting and trapping and has made his home in such as cave – a secret cave because some bad guy is out to get him for some reason. Haven’t

completed the plot yet but . . . “

“ . . . But, not a bad story although we both know it’s still just a story. I don’t want you getting yourself hurt – or worse. Life wouldn’t be the same for me without you constantly under foot, pestering me.”

“Thank you, Marshal.”

“You’re welcome, boy.”

It had been another of those guy-to-guy expressions of caring without having to use the ‘L’ word.

“I promise to think about what you’ve said before I go ahead and do some dumb thing.”

“That’s a start, I suppose. See you at lunch?”

It had been a question/command all rolled into four short words.

“Your way of keeping track of me?” Johnny said/asked

It had been a very insightful comeback all rolled into his own seven short words.

“I’m thinking we’ve come to know each other very well,” the Marshal said nodding.

“Very well is better than ‘too well’ I suppose,” Johnny said.

He scooted down off the edge of the Marshal’s desk and left the office.

‘This being precious to a lot of people is great, but it sure does complicate and constrain (limit) the life of an almost fourteen-year-old boy,’ he thought to himself.

He headed to the alley behind the saloon and entered. Again, Frank, the owner wasn’t there so he went on into the main room up front. Will, the new bartender, was the only one there. He was sitting on a stool he kept behind the counter.

Johnny climbed up onto a stool out front and pounded the counter.

“Set me up and don’t dawdle, sir!”

“Water, I assume,” Will said, offering a smile and delivering a glass.

“Thanks. I’ll tank up for the hot day ahead. Think I’ll head out to Sunday Creek. A couple of good swimming holes out there.”

“Sounds like a good way for a guy your age to spend a summer day.”

“What does a guy your age do on his summer days off around here?”

“Most guys would spend time at the saloon, I suppose, but that obviously doesn’t work for me.”

“Because you want to be elsewhere or because you don’t drink?”

“Both, I guess. I usually go riding. I like being alone and I like to be out in the country. One reason I returned here from back in St. Joe.”

“You bar tend back there, too?”

“Did this and that.”

Johnny understood that the man didn’t want to go into that period of his life so he dropped it and moved on.

“Any women in your life?”

“Whoa! I’ve only been here a month. I’m probably not as fast a worker with the women as you are.”

It was worth mutual smiles and chuckles.

“Why you interested in how I spend my free time?”

“I’m a writer in the making. Cilla says the more I know about people the better writer I’ll be able to become. I put everybody through inquisitions like this – no offense, I hope.”

“No. Of course, not. Barkeepers are well known as folks who like to talk, but I suppose we covered that in our earlier conversation.”

Johnny nodded, actually pleased that Will remembered specifics from that chat they had. He figured when a man talked to hundreds of people a week it wasn’t likely he’d remember details like that.

“So, I imagine you have written some stories,” Will said, following up on Johnny’s comment.

“I’ll take that as a question. Yes. Had one published as a four-part serial in the local newspaper and it’s being republished down in Wichita and over in Kansas City at a paper where my father worked. It was about a young Pony Express rider.”

“Sounds interesting. Fact or fiction?”

“Can it be fictional fact?”

“It can be as far as I’m concerned.”

Will offered another broad smile. Johnny noticed several things about the man. He wore a loose shirt and a long, open vest that draped to the middle of his thighs. It seemed like a lot of clothing for June in Red Bend and made him appear to be a larger person than he actually was. It was not the tighter fitting ‘uniform’ Ken, the former bartender had worn. He sipped at his own glass of water, often. He still had a bandage on his right thumb – one that had been there the first time they met. From time to time he would strike his right hand against his thigh as if to work out a muscle spasm or cramp. Johnny chose not to speak about any of that.

“So, you’ve been here a month?”

“This time around. Worked behind this very bar a few years back. Left six years ago.”

“Glad you came back. Have family here?”

“No. A few good friends. I feel comfortable here. It has easy access to several nice places – Salina, Great Bend, McPherson.”

“I feel the same way – about Red Bend – comfortable and good friends. My best friend is away for the summer – down in Wichita. My other good friend moved to Garden City.”

“Got a girlfriend.”

“Sorta, I’m thinking,” Johnny answered, mounting a clearly puzzled look – one typical of most almost fourteen-year-old boys when it came to questions about girlfriends.

“Ah. One of those maybe/perhaps relationships. I’ve had my share of those, myself.”

They shared a smile and nodded. Johnny was always

eager to learn more about boy and girl things, but figured that was not a legitimate topic for a boy his age and a barkeeper. He switched the conversation back to Will.

“How does a barkeeper’s days off work?”

“Sunday, when the saloon’s closed and Tuesday, which is usually a very slow day. Ken, the barkeeper who was here before I came back covers for me on Tuesday. He’s a cook by training and he’s working out at the Double M ranch west of town, now.”

“That seemed to work out well for you – him leaving just when you were coming back.”

“It did. Not sure I believe in luck, but at times like that I sometimes wonder.”

“I know I’m probably being way too nosey. Just tell me to shove off when I become a pest.”

“You’re fine. I appreciate the company.”

“You said you had friends here. That’s nice.”

What Johnny was really doing, of course, was trying to find out who they were.

“Frank – Frank Johnson the owner of this place has been a good friend for lots of years – and Betty Ann – she entertains here in the evenings. You probably know her. Ken, like I mentioned, and of course good old Doc.”

“Doc?” Johnny asked somewhat surprised. “He’s probably my best grown-up friend besides my Aunt Bea who I live with. He saved my life when I first arrived here about a year ago.”

Will did nothing more than nod. Johnny thought that was odd. He’d mentioned having had his life saved and Will didn’t even follow up on it. Maybe somebody had already told him the story – Doc, himself, perhaps, although Doc was always very closed mouthed about his patients’ private information.

“I guess you haven’t learned anything about the Crimson Bandit or you’d have mentioned it,” Johnny said.

“Afraid not. Most folks don’t even seem to know about

the hold-ups. I'll keep listening."

It was time Johnny was moving on.

He put the glass of water to his mouth and finished it in one continuous series of gurgling gulps.

"Put that on my tab, barkeep," Johnny said wiping across his lips with the back of his hand the way he'd seen men do after finishing a shot of whiskey.

"I don't know if Frank will allow it. I think that's two waters in one week. Tab's getting pretty big."

They shared smiles.

Johnny liked Will. Despite his mention of friends, Will seemed to be a very lonely person – sad even. That would call for another talk at another time. Johnny had a Bandit to catch!

He trotted back to the Marshal's office.

"Do you have the dates of the C.B. robberies?"

"Not on a list. You can probably construct a list from the information on the wanted posters and the telegrams."

"And from the articles. Good idea. Alright if I set up shop over there in the corner at the table?"

"Have at it. It's a good idea. I'd appreciate a copy of that list when you're finished.

"I'm sure you would appreciate that," Johnny said teasing.

The Marshal understood the tease and delivered the pile of telegrams without any follow-up.

After a half hour Johnny pushed back from the table.

"All within the past five weeks. I'll make a copy of my list for you."

He completed the list. A deputy arrived with a packet from the stage coach.

"Another Crimson Guy hold up to put on your list, Johnny. Got a updated wanted poster here from the Marshal's headquarters in Topeka."

“That makes seven in five weeks – three in the last two weeks,” Johnny said putting things together in his head and accepting the sheet of paper from the Marshal. “Wonder why the sudden increase in activity? It was two men in a wagon following the stage route west from Kansas City. Looks to have taken place at just about the same place my stage was when he stopped it. It’s an ideal location for a bandit – a stand of trees just ten yards off to the north of the road and right where it begins a climb up a fairly good rise so the horses could never outrun a man on horseback.”

“Interesting points. What you’re saying is the Crimson Bandit chooses his spots with great care – nothing willy-nilly about it.”

Johnny took note of the fact that the Marshal had referred to the thief by the name he had created – one Cal had purposefully been avoiding using. ‘One small victory for Johnny,’ he thought to himself.

Johnny handed over the copy of the list, folded his own and slid it into his shirt pocket. He immediately removed it and put it in his rear pants pocket. It was clear to him that he would be removing that shirt just as soon as he could and didn’t want to chance losing the paper. Johnny was one who thought ahead – well, usually!

He crossed the street and entered the newspaper office.

“Anything new on the Crimson Bandit from your end?” he asked Cilla.

“Stage driver just told me he struck again over the past weekend, out east of town.”

“I heard about that. Right where he stopped my coach.”

Cilla nodded.

“Any new information about him from the stage guy?” Johnny continued.

“The men he robbed didn’t seem to have anything to say. They didn’t even continue on into Red Bend. Turned around and went back to McPherson to report it.”



“That’s odd. Makes me wonder where they were going and why the robbery kept them from continuing. It was money that the Crimson Bandit took from them according to the new wanted poster the Marshal just received.”

“There’s an article here in this new paper from McPherson that I think will interest you,” she said handing it to Johnny.

“Got a brief version for me?”

“A small bank robbed out in Crawford two weeks ago by two men who made their getaway in a wagon pulled by a three horse team. The deputy was out of town and no one even followed them.”

“Got a name of the bank?”

“It’s in the article. Crawford is a tiny town. I was surprised to hear it had a bank.”

Johnny trotted to the telegraph office and sent one of his ‘JB for Marshal Calvin’ telegrams to the bank. He had a reply in twenty minutes – perhaps an all-time turn-around record.

He went immediately to find the Marshal.

“Getting closer, Marshal. Follow me on this. How many three horse teams do you see come through town?”

“Haven’t seen one in a yea – maybe longer. Usually only used for heavy loads over flat land or bursts of speed. Sometimes used when logging. Why?”

“Two-part answer. Part one: the bank at Crawford was robbed two weeks ago, by two men, and the thieves made their getaway in a wagon pulled by a three-horse team. Part two: the Crimson Bandit’s holdup last weekend was of two men driving a wagon pulled by a three horse team, and it was money they took.”

“I see what you’re going for and must admit that seems like more than a coincidence.”

“The banker says the team was made up of two blacks on the outside and a gray in the middle. Can you find out about the team involved in the Crimson Bandit’s holdup?”

“Go ahead and send the telegram to the sheriff over at McPherson – Sheriff Dooley. Which reminds me, do you realize that my telegraph bill has more than tripled since you’ve come to town?”

“I didn’t, although it makes sense. You and I have been using modern technology to its fullest extent these past few months as we’ve tracked down bad guy after bad guy. I’m proud of you for embracing this age of electronic communication.”

“You are so full of it. Scat. Get that wire sent.”

Again, the return telegram was amazingly rapid – less than an hour. Things concerning the Crimson Bandit seemed to get immediate attention. Gus, the telegrapher, took full credit for the speed and efficiency even though he clearly had nothing to do with it.

Things were beginning to come together quite nicely, Johnny thought. It was only ten o’clock. He had time for a short swim in Sunday Creek before meeting the Marshal for lunch. Earlier, he had promised Diablo he could stand flank deep in water to cool off and he certainly couldn’t just waist the time waiting around on Diablo – he’d fill that wait time by having a swim and cool off, himself. He chuckled to himself over the absurdity of the rationalization (excuse).

Shirt finally off and pulled through his belt, Johnny gave Diab his head and they galloped full out most of the way. The horse loved the run and the freedom to follow his nose. The boy loved the wind on his face and chest and blowing through his hair.

‘They’ swam for nearly an hour. Swimming was always a good thinking time for Johnny. He’d swim a few laps, try to extend his distance underwater, and just enjoy floating on his back making up stories suggested by the cloud formations in the sky. He sat in the sun for a few minutes to dry off and they were soon on their way back to town on schedule for lunch at noon.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“So, you been up to the cave?” was the first thing out of the Marshal’s mouth as Johnny joined the three of them at Doc’s table for lunch.

“I did go over to Sunday Creek, but just for a swim and some quality thinking time. Not as far north as the falls.”

He reached into his hip pocket and produced a yellow piece of paper and continued.

“We got a return telegram from Sheriff Dooley. The three-horse team matches the bank robbers’ team exactly. Now, what was that you were saying about me basing everything in mere speculation?”

“Up until we received that last telegram that’s all it was. Anyway, I heard from the Sheriff over in Great Bend and the Butler/Anderson guy was seen over there yesterday.”

“They catch him?”

“No. He now seems to be traveling on horseback and was heading our way when he was spotted.”

“That’s great!” Johnny said.

“How’s that?” the Marshal came back.

“He comes here. We catch him. He tells what he knows and we go pick up the Crimson Bandit.”

“Just like that?”

“Of course. I have great faith in us.”

Privately, Johnny wondered if Butler was the one who had been staying out at the cave. He didn't share that.

They ordered lunch. Cilla had a salad and the men steaks. Conversation turned to other, more commonplace things. As they were finishing up Johnny asked a question.

“How far a ride is it out to the Double M ranch?”

“A good two hours. What business you have out there?” The Marshal asked.

“No business, but I hear that's where Ken, the previous bartender at the saloon is working now. Thought I'd ride out and see how he's doing.”

Skeptical glances were exchanged among the other three, but no one commented. They had come to understand that Johnny always had two agendas (plans) – the one he shared with others and the private one he kept to himself until he felt the time was right to share it.

Surprised he hadn't been questioned about it he stood and excused himself.

“I'll check back before I go home for the day,” he said looking at the Marshal.

The Marshal nodded.

“I need to talk to you, too, Doc. Nothing urgent. Maybe tomorrow.”

He left. Cilla turned to the others.

“He's full of mystery, the past few days.”

“And that seldom ends up well for him,” the Marshal said.

“You two worry like old hens,” Doc said. “Give the boy some room to grow up. So, he makes a few misjudgments. That's how boys learn how to become men. It's all a system of mistakes and corrections. Been that way since Adam. Seems like if you had your way he'd just sit on his hands 'til he turned thirty.”

“Adam didn’t have to contend with bandits wielding six shooters,” the Marshal offered in defense of his statements.

Doc just raised his eyebrows. He’d said his say and wouldn’t press it.

Johnny and Diablo were soon heading west down Main Street on their way to the Double M. It was another hot afternoon and he began to question if it were really a good idea – for Diab. His quandary was soon put to rest when he spotted a distant rider coming down the trail from the other direction.

He urged Diablo into the trees alongside the road hoping he hadn’t been seen. With Butler in the area he decided he couldn’t be too careful.

He waited until he could recognize the rider. It was Ken. Johnny moved back out onto the road and waited.

“Hey, Ken. One of my two favorite bartenders. I was just on my way out to the Double M to see how you are doing.”

“How nice. I guess I saved you the ride. I work at the Saloon tomorrow and this afternoon I’m spending time with Betty Ann.”

Johnny and Diablo turned around and they rode alongside Ken back toward Red Bend.

“Nice horse,” Johnny said. “It’s rare to see a black horse that’s really black all over. Very pretty.”

“A loner to me from the ranch. I could never afford such an animal myself. That nag you’re riding isn’t so bad either. He yours?”

“Yup. Had him since I was a kid – back in KC before I moved out here. We’re like best friends.”

“Well, he’s sure a beauty.”

“How’s work going out there? I understand from Will that you’re the cook.”

“Going well and yes I am – feed twenty hungry hands three times a day five days a week. That’s lots of grub. It’s like a dream job for me, though.”

“I’d estimate you have to crack about six dozen eggs

every morning.”

“And you’d be right on. The ranch has chickens for eggs, cows for milk and beef, hogs for ham and bacon, and bees for honey.”

“Pretty handy, I suppose.”

Ken nodded.

“May I ask how you came by the job?” Johnny asked.

“It came to me, really. Darndest thing. The owner showed up at the saloon one morning and said he heard I was a first class cook. His cook was about to leave for California. He made me a really great offer – good salary and two days off a week. I jumped at it.

“When I went to tell Frank about the offer, I told him I’d stay on at the Saloon until he could find somebody to replace me. Talk about coincidences – Will had contacted him two weeks before about coming back. It all worked out just perfect.”

Almost too perfect – ly, Johnny thought to himself. He had a follow-up question (of course!).

“The former cook out there get a better offer in California, did he?”

“Not sure about that. The owner said that one day he drew the pay owed him and just up and left. He wasn’t too happy about that as you can imagine.”

“The rancher had known about you before, I guess.”

“Not really. That cook that left, recommended me and I’ll be honest with you, I’d never even met the man – didn’t know he existed is more like it. Can’t understand that, but I’m sure not going to fret over it.”

“You believe in luck?” Johnny asked.

“I do now!”

Johnny nodded offering a quick grin. Like always happened as a result of well-crafted questions, his had raised more new ones than they had answered. He loved that!

It was only a fifteen-minute ride back to town and they

spent the rest of the time in casual conversation – Johnny’s interest in writing, the Crimson Bandit, and of course, Clair and Betty Ann.

Ken stopped to arrange for his horse at the livery stable. Johnny tied up in front of the newspaper office below Doc’s office. He was soon up the steps two at a time enjoying the developing strength he felt in his legs – legs that had grown nearly six inches and had become a good deal more muscular since his first trips up those stairs the summer before.

Doc was sitting, reading, in one of the big chairs beside the windows at the front of his bed room.

“Knock, knock,” Johnny said announcing himself as he rapped his knuckles against the door frame.

“Johnny. Your arrival is far earlier than I anticipated.”

“I love that,”

“You love what?”

Johnny tried to shift his voice into the higher pitch that characterized Doc’s. It was becoming more and more difficult as Johnny’s voice became deeper and deeper.

“Your arrival is far earlier than I anticipated. Most guys would say something like, ‘you got here sooner than I thought you would’.”

“Would you prefer that I dummy down my rhetoric (language pattern)?”

“Oh, no. I take it as a grand compliment that you don’t. It’s great. I’ve learned a great deal about language from just conversing with you.”

“How nice. I will take that as a compliment. What’s on your young mind?”

“Probably something you won’t be able to tell me – doctor/patient privacy stuff.”

“Then why are you going to ask?”

“Two reasons. One, I’m worried about somebody’s health and two, for a reason I’m not ready to share yet.”



“Oh, well, then, that certainly clears it up. Ask away, I suppose. You know my ground rules about not sharing patient information.”

Johnny nodded and paused a moment wanting to phrase his concern and question just right.

“It appears to me that Will is not well, but that he doesn’t want anybody to know. He has lost a lot of weight and he wears several layers of clothing to disguise that fact. He seems to be dehydrated – he sips at water all day long. The cut on his thumb is healing very slowly. He sits down on the stool behind the bar a lot – the stool was not even there when Ken was the barkeeper.

“A part of that first reason for asking is just to say that if he needs money for some kind of treatment that you know about, I want to make sure he has whatever it takes.”

“I see. What I hear you outlining is your belief that Will has Diabetes Militias and you know I could not verify that. Sometimes symptoms speak for themselves without medical verification – sometimes not, of course.”

“Right up to those last four words I thought you were giving me something useful. I guess we can leave it this way. If any of your diabetes patients need special help they can’t afford, let me know and I’ll see that you get the money to use without me ever needing to know who it is. Can we leave it that way?”

“We can. A very kind and compassionate gesture, Johnny. At this point, there is no need for such a donation.”

“Alright, then. I guess I can live with that.”

He nodded slowly, clearly thinking it through again and convincing himself it was the only way to go at that moment.

“Ken counts you as one of his good friends here in Red Bend, Doc.”

“And I him.”

“And with those three words the cagy old country doctor closes the topic,” Johnny said.

“How astute of you to discern the veracity in those

words.”

“And there he goes again saying – ‘how clever of me to understand what you meant’.”

Doc changed the subject.

“You didn’t get out to the Double M?”

“I met Ken about two miles outside of town. He’s in for the rest of the day to be with Betty Ann and then to work for Will tomorrow – Tuesday. I didn’t know he and Betty Ann were that kind of friends – boyfriend and girlfriend. Do you know if Will and Ken knew each other before Will returned?”

“They were only very casual acquaintances, I’d say. They met when Will replaced Ken a few years back and again recently when Will returned. Not a long-term friendship by any means.”

“Does Will have some relationship with the Double M?”

“I think it’s general knowledge around town that Will dated the daughter of the Double M’s owner for a while a few years back. Since then she’s married. There really aren’t all that many young men and women of the same ages in these parts. They tend to date whoever is available. It seems to work. We have a lot of very solid marriages among our young folks.”

“I suppose that’s one of the advantages I will have by getting to go off to college. There are girls in college, right?”

“Yes, but probably not as many as you might think – or want. Virtually none in medical school. Probably more among English majors – other potential writers and teachers.”

“Good to know, although I promise that won’t influence my choice of a field.”

Doc smiled. Its meaning was not immediately obvious.

“You and Clair still . . . you and Clair?” Doc asked rather clumsily for him.”

It was Johnny’s turn to smile.

“We still think of each other as special, if that’s what you’re getting at. I guess we don’t spend as much time together since Abbot and Jerry came into my life. I’ve been

thinking I need to get Jerry interested in a girl. I suppose girls would consider him nice looking, wouldn't they?"

"I would think most girls would think he is very good looking. He has a built-in problem, though, you know."

"The two-race thing – white and Indian?"

Doc nodded.

"That's codswallop (nonsense), you know."

"The fact that I know and you know, doesn't solve Jericho's problem in most people's minds, I'm afraid."

"Is there someplace that's more tolerant of such things?"

"I wish I could say there was. Intolerance seems to be a universal, if contemptible, trait among humans. It's based in fear, I think, and few things can direct one's life more forcefully than fear. In a way, you are fortunate. In many places in the world orphans are also looked upon as outcasts."

Johnny had not realized that. It seemed incomprehensible to him. He had nothing to do with the fact he was an orphan. So, why would it be held against him? But then, Jerry had nothing to do with being a half breed, either. It would definitely be a topic he and Doc would have to pursue further at other times – and they would. On that day, however, Johnny still had a bandit or two or catch.

Johnny excused himself and soon found himself at the livery stable to make sure Harry was doing alright.

"Johnny. Hoped you'd stop by. Got a letter from Jericho. He said to let you read it."

"Great. He doing well, is he?"

"Seems to be. Here, you take a gander."

The sheet of paper that he removed from his shirt pocket had clearly been opened and refolded many times, suggesting it had been read and reread often. Jerry was obviously very important to Harry.

The letter told about the family he was staying with and the veterinarian with whom he worked and studied. He was involved in a young people's group at a church and seemed to

be enjoying all those new friends. Johnny was happy for him. He mentioned a girl – Margaret Beth White Cloud. Johnny wondered if his friend had found a possible way around the problems his mixed heritage might present for him there in Red Bend. He'd never heard of an Indian girl named Margaret Beth or a white girl name White Cloud. He hoped there would be more in the next letter. He would take time that night to write to Jerry.

Before heading home, he stopped at the newspaper office.

“How well do you know Will?” he asked falling into the big chair in the corner by the window.

“As well as anybody around here, I guess. He's always been sort of a loner. Why do you ask?”

“You wouldn't like my evasive answer to that question so can we just skip it?”

“Sure. I prize an honest response, you know.”

“He's clearly no dummy. What do you know about that?”

“His father was a preacher who had graduated from seminary – that indicates some genetic intelligence I imagine. I believe his mother was a teacher. Will went to a Normal School (teacher's college) for a year. That's more education than most teachers have out here on the plains.”

“Do you know where he grew up?”

“Up at Manhattan, Kansas – between Salina and Topeka.”

“He still have family up there?”

“I don't think so. His father was killed during a bank robbery when Will was about your age – wrong place / wrong time. His mother took a bullet to her spine and she was never able to walk again. She died shortly after – Will says of a broken heart rather than a broken back.”

“Any idea why he became a bartender instead of a teacher?”

“Not really. For all I know he may have taught some.

It's a topic that has never come up between us. Like I indicated, he is a private person. My guess is he became depressed over his parents' deaths – perhaps over the injustice of it all. He had full responsibility for his mother's care by the time he was fourteen. Maybe he can't, or doesn't want to handle the responsibility that goes with being a teacher – making sure your students learn the things they will need to know in order to build a great life for themselves really is a huge responsibility.”

“I had never thought about teachers being responsible in that way. I'll have to give it more thought. Thanks for the insight.”

They exchanged a nod.

“What do you know about his health?”

“Nothing, I suppose,” Cilla said. “You know something?”

“He just seems tired all the time – always sitting on a stool behind the bar. He works long hours. That probably explains it. I am often told I see problems where none exist – and often that ‘teller’ is you as I recall.”

They shared a chuckle.

Cilla's information had added a few things to what he already knew. Johnny changed the topic.

“Anything come across your desk that might be related to the Crimson Bandit?”

“I think you're up to date on everything I know. I suppose Cal told you that the Anderson fellow – the one who had jewels stolen down near Sandy Ford and who you think is the wanted man named Butler – is in this area. Can't figure why he'd come back here where he was robbed.”

“My hunch is he knows who robbed him and he's coming back to either repossess his jewels or take revenge on the Bandit.”

“That hunch based on anything solid?”

“Well, logically, like you indicated, most folks who had been robbed here wouldn't risk returning here, so since he has

returned, I think my hunch is all quite logical.”

“Your logic about his illogic is hard to dispute - logically. Just don't you go looking for him – the Anderson/Butler character, I mean. That's what we pay Cal to take care of for us.”

Johnny smiled and nodded hoping that combination would be taken as an adequate response to her advice without really committing him to following it.

He and Diablo were soon on their way home.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

Johnny arrived home at four o'clock. It gave him some time to work in the garden before supper. He had expanded it by half from the summer before. Although his Aunt Bea was a substantial woman, Johnny out ate her two times over, so, a larger garden seemed in order. She refused to take money from him to buy supplies and such, saying she had plenty to take care of his needs. So, Johnny's bank account just continued to grow.

After supper Johnny began his letter to Jerry.

Dear Jerry,

Harry let me read your letter. I am happy that things are going so well for you. I'm sure you are learning a lot and probably teaching the vet a few things he didn't know where it comes to horses.

Tell me more about Margaret!!! How old is she? Is she pretty? What are her interests (besides you – ha ha). What about her family if that's not too personal? Are you married yet? (ha, ha, ha, ha.)

I have a new mystery going here – the Crimson Bandit. I'm thinking he is sort of like a Robin Hood with a twist. I think he steals from people who have stolen things and then returns it to the owners when he can or just gives it away to good causes if he can't do that.

It puts me smack dab in the middle of the biggest



dilemma of my life. He is righting wrongs and that is good. He is breaking the law and that is bad. He never hurts anybody. I understand that in order for our society to survive as a safe and orderly place in which to live we all have to abide by the laws. Otherwise civilized relationships among people fall apart – everybody just doing whatever they wanted whenever they wanted to never thinking about who it might hurt. But this guy is trying to do good – and I believe he is. So, you see, it's quite a dilemma like I said. If you have any thoughts on the matter for me, I'm eager to hear them.

Everybody here says for me to say hello to you from them: Doc, Cilla, the Marshal, Aunt Bea, Clair, and Harry of course. I can tell he really misses you, but he is so proud of you for pursuing your dream like you are.

I'm trying to write another story – this one about the Crimson Bandit (what do you think of that name?). It's hard to get past the first chapter because I can't figure out how it will end. In some ways, I suppose I am afraid how it will end.

I better stop. Thanks for being my friend.

Johnny (one third of the tres inteligente amigos!)

\* \* \*

The restaurant opened at five in the morning. Johnny had not slept well – too much on his mind. He was sprawled out on the wooden sidewalk in front when it opened. He could have gone in though the alley door – it was open at four – but his mind was still busy trying to solve the many huge problems faced by the human species.

He entered at five, went to Doc's table and nursed a tall glass of lemonade, telling the waitress he'd wait to order 'til Doc arrived.

At seven he felt his shoulder being jostled.

"You going to sleep the day away?"

It was Doc's voice. He had apparently put his head on his arms on the table and fallen asleep.

"Hadn't been my plan. Good morning."

He stretched himself awake.

“Anything new,” Doc.

“I’ll ignore the absurdity of that question – of course there are new things, every second there are new things – but in answer to what I believe you mean – is there any special new thing in my life – yes, there is. Mine and yours, to be more accurate.”

“You have my attention, and we will talk about the structure of that neatly garbled sentence, later.”

Doc continued unconcerned about the apparent disapproval of his attempt to communicate.

“Yesterday afternoon Mr. Yeager at the bank came to see me. He said some money had arrived on the stage addressed to him at the bank. There was a letter stating it was to be put in a joint account – you and me. Can you explain that?”

“Probably. Just give me two slurps worth of time, here.”

Two slurps later he spoke.

“Here’s my first take. I’ve been puzzled about how the Crimson Bandit is returning the money he takes – by returning it I mean, getting it back to the people it was stolen from. Like, in the case of the jewels, I imagine that stash was added to from a number of separate robberies. It would be unreasonable to think he could know about all those individual jewel robberies, so when he finds things or money he can’t immediately account for he has a surplus – you see – stuff he doesn’t know who to return it to.”

“I follow you, but you do realize it is just pure fantasy built on no solid base whatsoever.”

“You have to agree that in the past my hunches have often turned out to be correct – in the end.”

Doc nodded giving Johnny that one with no further discussion. He took Johnny’s argument to its logical end point.

“So, you’re saying this Crimson Bandit fellow has decided to put that excess in a bank account for you and me to take care of.”

“Right. Somehow he knows we will see that it gets used well.”

Doc had another question.

“Why does he not just do that himself – keep a stash of money somewhere and distribute it where he thinks it is needed?”

“I think he did in the past – all that money he gave the school at McPherson for the library and teacher’s salary. Maybe something is changing for him. Maybe he is feeling the heat and is about to move on to other territory, but wants the money used here. I don’t really have an answer.”

“You REALLY don’t have anything to base any of this on, you know.”

Johnny shrugged. He understood his hunches were for him to believe and for others to come to believe once he had proved them.

“So, how much money in that account?”

“Over twenty thousand dollars.” (\$500,000 in today’s currency.)

“That’s what we figured was taken from the man on my stagecoach. It gives some credibility to the idea that man had not taken it all from one place and therefore explains why the Marshal can’t find a single robbery of that size in the state.”

“That does make sense. And, following your ‘hunch’, since the Bandit can’t really know where it all came from, he will want it to be used well for others who are in need.”

“Now you’re cookin’, Doc.”

“You know I don’t cook – thus this table, known as Doc’s table, here in the restaurant.”

“I will assume that is your early morning attempt at humor. Why a joint bank account, do you think? You and me.”

“I have no good idea. Perhaps he figured between the two of us, our knowledge of needy folks or causes would cover a wider age range. Or, maybe you have been added to carry on after I’m dead and buried.”

“Why us, do you think?”

“What kind of folks would you trust with that amount of money if the tables were turned?”

“People I knew I could trust to do good things with it. I see. I can understand that you’d be included, Doc, but why me? I’m just a kid who’s still struggling on a daily basis with what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“Clearly somebody knows things about what you hold to be important down deep inside yourself.”

“I can’t figure who,” Johnny said. “If it is from the Crimson Bandit it’s going to be really hard to help put him away for the robberies.”

“There’s a good chance it isn’t the Crimson Bandit. Likely some sort of coincidence. I think we need to broaden the thinking of our search.”

Cilla entered the restaurant and made her way to the table.

“Got something that may be related to the Crimson Bandit,” she said as Johnny stood and helped her take a seat.

“What it is?” he asked.

She took a newspaper from her big bag and spread it out on the table. It was from a small town north east of Red Bend.

“Page two, upper right article.”

“Johnny commandeered the paper and began reading out loud.

“Martin Mayfield, owner of the local general store that was robbed several weeks ago, says that when he arrived to open the store on Friday morning he found an envelope tacked to the door that contained the same amount of money that had been previously stolen. He is calling the thief the ‘Bandit with a Conscience’.

“It goes on, but just that much finally tends to substantiate my basic hunch – the Crimson Bandit is a modern-day Robin Hood – well, not exactly, but sort of the same idea. He takes back from the thieves and returns the

loot to the ones that were robbed in the first place.”

“By any name, it’s still wrong,” Doc said. “We have a system of law enforcement and justice to take care of such situations. When we sink to the level of vigilantism (taking the law into one’s own hands) we sink below the standard of legality to the level of the common criminal.”

“I know all that. I said as much in my letter to Jerry last night. But still . . .”

Cilla tried to come to the boy’s rescue.

“But still it doesn’t seem fair that a man who is unselfishly putting his own neck on the line to assist the victims should be treated like an outlaw.”

“That is exactly my thinking – my point. It seems unfair.”

“It may be,” Doc said, “but how would you change the law? Make it so that anybody who thought something was unfair would be allowed to do whatever he thought it took to make things fair?”

“I see your point – people define what they think is fair in different ways. What I think is fair, may not be what you think is fair. So, since the concept of fair is not a term everybody defines in the same way it can’t be used as the basis of rules or laws.”

“I think you see the problem,” Doc said.

“So, if this Bandit is really a good guy why wouldn’t he be using his skills to help the lawmen?”

“A good question,” Cilla said. “I imagine you will find some reasons when you think it through.”

“Like the so-called ‘wheels of justice’ work to slowly or have to follow rules and procedures that get in the way of quickly doing what’s right.”

“Yes. Things like that.”

“Living in a grown-up’s world stinks, sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” Doc agreed. “But not usually. The laws our forefathers have developed typically work to provide the most good for the most people.”

“But what about when they don’t?”

Cilla tried an answer.

“THAT is a possibility we all have to always keep in mind – to make sure justice doesn’t get lost in the laws and the courts. It’s not an easy thing.”

“It’s mind boggling, is what it is. So what do we do when we catch the Crimson Bandit – the good guy who breaks the law in order to be a good guy?”

“We apply the same standards to him that we apply to everybody else – the laws of the land,” Cilla said.

“I suppose he had to know going in what the law was and how it would handle him if he were to be caught,” Johnny said, thinking it through just a bit further. “He must have thought it was worth the risk for some reason.”

“I guess we won’t know what that reason is unless he chooses to tell us,” Doc said.

There was a long moment of silence. The Marshal arrived and took a seat. Johnny addressed him.

“Have you ever looked the other way when you saw a good person doing something that is against the law, but in that case really seemed to be the right thing to do?”

“My! I must have missed a meeting of the Red Bend Philosophical Society this morning.”

“Something like that,” Johnny said offering a quick smile.

The Marshal looked at Johnny.

“I am a lawman sworn to uphold the law. I do my best to weigh the factors that present themselves. With those things in mind you will understand why I could never admit to slipping the law the way you suggest in your question.”

Johnny thought he understood. The Marshal saw his duty as doing what was right, and he opened the door to the fact that ‘right’ and ‘legal’ sometimes did not coincide (agree).”

Somehow, Johnny felt better about things. He couldn’t put his finger on why, but he did feel better.

Although he believed he had plenty of evidence to back his hunch that C.B. was a good guy who for some reason felt it was necessary to bypass the law in order to complete his good deeds, Johnny knew he'd feel better about it if he had just a bit more evidence. He returned to the newspaper office with Cilla to give the papers one more look through.

By ten o'clock he had located two more stories similar enough to the one Cilla had brought to breakfast that he felt justified in his beliefs about the good intentions and behaviors of the Crimson Bandit.

He left to see if Harry needed any help at the livery stable. Harry was cleaning stalls and Johnny pitched in and help as they talked.

"Ever take care of a matched pair of well-bred black horses – in the past month or so?"

"Can't recall that I have. Something important?"

"Hard to say. You know me, I'm often overly inquisitive (nosey). Is that Ken's horse down in number five?"

"Yup. I suppose that could be half of the pair you was talking about – the ones the bandit fellow had."

"Double M flesh Ken tells me."

"They have simply wonderful horses out there. The owner's wife is from France and her family raised jumpers – really high class animals. She has an indoor jumping arena there on the ranch. Still imports horses some times."

"You have many regular boarders, here – horses that are kept here all the time?"

"Not many. Betty Ann the singer at the saloon keeps a horse here. The past month I've had Will's, the barkeep's, horse. They share a stall – number seven. Saves them both a few dollars a month doing it that way."

"Will said he liked to ride on Tuesdays and Sundays, but I hadn't thought about where he kept his horse."

"That's right. He's in and out of here early both mornings. I'd say he doesn't really ride her hard. She needs

very little care when she returns in the evening.”

“He seems like a gentle man,” Johnny said. “I can see him taking it easy on his rides.”

They finished up the stalls.

“Need anything else?” Johnny asked returning his rake to the rack by the front door.

“I didn’t need that, but I appreciated the help and the conversation. If you write Jericho, you be sure to tell him I’m doing just fine – because I am. Can’t have him makin’ up things to worry about.”

“I already wrote to him once. I promised him I’d keep him up to date on things around here.”

Johnny turned to leave through the front door. A man on a large black horse rode by heading west on Main Street. He was dressed in black from boots to hat.”

“You know that man?” Johnny asked.

Harry came to the door.

“Can’t say I do. He’s riding a beautiful horse. I’d a remembered that.”

“Gotta go,” Johnny said and he trotted off – also, west, keeping to the sidewalk.

The man tied up in front of the saloon and entered. Johnny wanted to get close enough to see his face and listen to him speak. He was about the same size as the Crimson Bandit and as far as he could tell, his horse was a match to one he had seen at the holdup.

He took a detour between buildings to the alley and entered the saloon through the back door. He moved as close to the bar as he dared. It was close enough to hear him speak.

In reality, Johnny didn’t remember the exact sound of the Bandit’s voice, but he did remember the perfect English he spoke. From what he could make out, the man at the bar used the language better than average, but it was not the perfect pattern he had heard at the robbery. It could be he was just dummying it down to disguise himself.



Johnny left and returned to the front of the building where he pretended to be admiring the horse from close up. He didn't know what he was looking for, but hoped he would recognize it when he saw it. No such luck.

The man left the saloon and went directly to his horse. Johnny didn't have time to leave.

"Can I help you?" the man asked in a gruff voice.

"Quite the contrary, sir. I work sometimes at the livery and just wondered if we could be of any assistance to you while you are in Red Bend."

"Just passin' through."

He unwound the reins from the hitching rail and mounted up. Without another word, he turned his horse east and was on his way out of town. It did appear that he was just passing through.

Johnny's first impulse was to follow him – Diab was tied up just across the street – but he decided against it. Instead he returned to the alley and the back door and then to the bar.

"Will, old man. How you doing?" Johnny said perching himself atop one of the high bar stools.

"I'm doing well. How about you?"

"Well," Johnny said nodding too much.

Will smiled.

"So, what do you want to know about the man who just left the saloon?"

"I'm that obvious, am I?" Johnny asked genuinely surprised that Will had seen through his approach.

"Hey. I'm a bar tender. I'm a keen observer of people. But, yes. In this case, it was pretty obvious."

"What did you learn about him?"

"He likes scotch, coming from Colby, heading for Kansas City. Money is no problem for him – he gave me a quarter for a fifteen-cent drink and said to keep the change. Removed his hat while he was inside – the mark of a gentleman not a trail bum. Smelled of perfumed soap – very

unusual coming in off the trail like that. Sort of like your aroma, Johnny. It's still lingering in the air."

Johnny leaned in close and took a long whiff through his nose. He nodded and sat back down on the stool.

"Guess I'll have to change brands of soap. Can't let the guys get a whiff of anything like that."

Will smiled.

"Anything new in your young life?" Will asked.

Foe just a moment, Johnny wanted to go through the verbal gymnastics about the 'anything new' phrase the way Doc had done with him earlier, but decided against it.

"Not a whole lot. Saw Ken this morning. I guess he and Betty Ann are spending time together this afternoon."

"Yes. He was in earlier and told me. That's the main reason he's willing to substitute for me I think – so he has an excuse to see her."

"They going to get married, you think?"

"I wouldn't doubt it although I'm thinking nobody but you, Betty Ann and I realize it."

"Not Ken, you mean?"

"Believe me, the groom is usually the last to know."

They shared a chuckle. Johnny was becoming more and more confused about the marriage thing. He had always been led to believe it was the man who did the asking. Recent information seemed to be muddying the water – quite a bit. It seemed the female of the species was not only attractive and desirable, but devious (scheming) to the core!

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

The following morning Johnny and Diablo were back on the trail heading cross country, north of Red Bend, from Aunt Bea's toward Sunday Creek. Their goal that morning was the waterfall – more specifically they were headed toward the cave behind the waterfall.

On the way, Johnny wanted to check out the long narrow tunnel he and his friends had discovered while searching for his Aunt and the banker's wife a few months before (Kidnapped!).

It had come to him that the Crimson Bandit would not keep his horses in a public place – they were easily identifiable as outstanding animals. He was convinced that Red Bend was his center of operation. Therefore, he had to be hiding them somewhere near Red Bend. The things Will had learned about the man in black the day before – Monday – notwithstanding, that stranger was still on Johnny's short list for the bad guy – not at the top, but suddenly on the list. If he were the Bandit, he'd be around to be seen again. The waterfall cave seemed like one of several possible hiding places. The cave leading to the Mill seemed like another.

The bushes, which had hidden the entrance for many years, had righted themselves since the land slide, and again kept the opening mostly out of sight. He tethered Diablo to

one of the trees nearby and removed a candle from his saddlebag. He walked into the cave a distance of some twenty-five yards – beyond where the cave darkened as it turned north – before deciding it was not the place he was looking for. Being inside there, brought memories that made him momentarily miss his two good friends. That day he was on his own and he'd make the best of it.

He exited the cave, mounted up, and urged Diablo north east on a course to meet the creek. A half hour later the creek was in sight. Johnny dismounted and let Diablo drink. He helped himself to water from his canteen, cut an apple in half and shared it with his four-legged friend.

They headed north along the creek, walking side by side. During the kidnapping, he and his friends had discovered several places that might be more suitable to hide horses south and east of town, and he might head down that way after he explored the waterfall cave one more time. He was drawn back to it because it had contained signs that somebody with a horse had been there quite recently.

The banks near the waterfall were high on both sides with numerous, large rock outcroppings. There was a narrow trail from the meadow that led down the bank to the water's edge.

As he approached the point at which the trail veered slightly east and descended toward the water, he heard voices. He pulled Diablo to the side of the trail and left him there, moving ahead on foot, slowly and with great care keeping to the shadows of the bushes at the base of the slope.

As the falls came into view, so did the sources of the voices. Standing in front of the falls facing him was the Crimson Bandit, with both of his horses on his right. With his back to Johnny, was a second man on a horse, holding a gun on C.B. The mounted man was speaking.

"Either give me back my jewels or the five hundred dollars they are worth or you'll take a slug in your chest."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the masked bandit said, his hands held high in the air.

Johnny assumed from his comments that the man on the horse was the jewelry thief. That made him Butler/Anderson, Bad Guy # 1. Johnny wished he could see his face and the scar that would clinch the identification. He couldn't from where he stood, but from what he had overheard it was obvious what was going on.

Several things became clear to Johnny in a split second. C.B. was who had been using the cave – probably mostly as a place to keep his horses. He had been gone, the first-time Johnny had visited there. Butler had somehow tracked him down, and was there to confront the man who he knew had robbed him. The Marshal would have never allowed Butler to shoot C. B. and Johnny was certain he wouldn't have wanted him to allow it either. So, he made a decision to act in the Marshal's place – he would try and assist the Crimson Bandit. Whatever might happen later he would deal with later. He couldn't just stand there and watch someone get shot.

He scanned the ground for something he could use as a weapon – a large stone or a piece of wood, perhaps. His eyes lit on a heavy, substantial, stick somewhat larger than a ball bat. He picked it up. With his finger against his lips signaling quiet, he stepped out behind Butler to a spot where only the Bandit could see him. It was clear the masked man understood Johnny's intention although his suddenly furrowed brow suggested he was not really in favor of what the boy had in mind.

Johnny did not hesitate. He bent low to minimize his shadow and moved forward behind Butler where he sat astride his horse. He saw two alternative actions he could take – go for the knockout or do something that would draw his attention away so C.B. could somehow take charge.

As he closed on the man it became clear he sat too high for Johnny to deliver any sort of powerful blow to his head. So, instead, he raised the club and in single sweep delivered it with great force against the man's right side just under his arm pit. His intention had been to hit the man's ribs which, from personal experience, Johnny knew was quite painful.

Butler turned with a jerk to discover what had happened. In the process his right hand, in which he was holding his six-shooter, moved in Johnny's direction.

With a second, perfectly directed upward blow, Johnny dislodged the gun from his hand and it fell into the water. The Crimson Bandit was immediately on top of the man, dragging Butler to the ground and quieting him with the display of his own gun.

He rolled him onto his stomach and soon had him trussed up using the rope from Butler's lasso which had been tied to his saddle. He worked quickly without speaking. No more than two minutes had elapsed when he lifted Butler back onto his horse – laying belly down across his saddle. He tied him in place, went back to his horses, and mounted one, leading the other up the trail past Butler and Johnny.

As he came even with Johnny he stopped for a moment and tipped his hat, offering the hint of a smile, before he rode on up the bank to the meadow and galloped into the woods just to the east.

Johnny understood what the Crimson Bandit had intended for him to do. Butler continued to curse in a loud voice. Johnny used his bandana as a gag and soon had that stopped. He turned Butler's horse around, mounted Diablo and led his captured bad guy back into Red Bend. The scar was obvious so he had no reservations about it being the Anderson/Butler guy.

His dilemma concerned just what story he would tell the Marshal. It would not be conceivable that an unarmed boy of his age and stature could have captured the seasoned outlaw all by himself. He would have had to have had help, but from whom? He might just go with the truth – it seemed an odd and somewhat unfamiliar way for him to go, but just maybe it would work!"

As Johnny approached the west end of Main Street, he paused, wondering if he should sound the alarm with three blasts from his whistle or mount no fanfare as he made his way to the Marshal's office.

He opted for the second approach. There he was,

riding Diablo down the center of Main Street leading the outlaw's horse behind him, with Butler hogtied and draped over its saddle. People stopped on the sidewalk, turning to take in the odd sight. Doc looked down from his bedroom. Cilla caught sight of them through her big windows. By the time Johnny arrived at the Marshal's office there were several dozen people crowding around, all asking questions at once.

Johnny called out.

"Marshal. I need a little help out here."

First, a deputy appeared in the door. He was followed immediately by Cal.

"What in tarnation have you gone and done now, son?"

"Captured Butler, the jewel thief, for one thing. Had to gag him because he kept making his discomfort known in loud words I knew were not appropriate for the women and children of Red Bend to have to hear."

Johnny dismounted, walked back to Butler and pointed to the scar near the man's ear.

"From what I can tell he's really upset with the Crimson Bandit for some reason."

The Marshal began to speak.

"How? Where? Oh, never mind. Deputy, get the man into a cell."

Johnny felt a familiar arm settle across his shoulders. He looked up. It was Doc.

"On the surface, it looks like the darndest, fooliest, thing you've ever done in the long line of darned, fool things you've been known to do. You alright?"

"I'm great. And, I believe I have the mystery of the Crimson Bandit solved."

"This guy is the Crimson Bandit?" Cilla asked, a puzzled look coming to occupy her face.

"Oh, no. This is the Anderson/Butler jewel thief guy. The Crimson Bandit assisted me in capturing him. I'm sure Butler will verify that fact."



“The Crimson Bandit assisted YOU in the capture?” the Marshal asked, removing his hat and wiping the sweat from his forehead.”

“Yup. Pretty great, huh?”

“That remains to be seen. So, where is this Crimson Bandit?”

“He begged off, clearly thinking I was capable of handling the delivery on my own – as I clearly was.”

Before the Marshal could speak, Johnny continued.

“Tell you what,” he began, “the story is somewhat complex in its simplicity. Let me treat you to lunch and I’ll regale you with my heroic exploits on behalf of the good citizens of central Kansas.”

“That include Doc and me?” Cilla asked.

“Of course – Los cuatro amigos inteligentes (the four intelligent friends).”

“Tres amigos inteligente y un poco estúpidos amigos,” the Marshal suggested, instead (three intelligent friends and one pretty stupid friend).

Johnny smiled. He would let them have their say. He knew that once they got it out of their systems they’d come around and appreciate what he had done.

With Butler securely behind bars, the Marshal sent telegraphs notifying the marshal’s office in Topeka and a number of the area sheriffs of Butler’s capture. He then joined the others for lunch. The conversation was already underway.

“You could have gotten yourself killed,” Cilla was saying with no small amount of emotion.

“This is not the kind of good judgment we expect from you,” Doc said.

“What they said,” the Marshal added as he took a seat at the table.

“Whenever your ranting is over, I’ll be happy to explain to you what happened and how C.B. and I teamed up to make the capture. It just might be useful if not important for you to

understand the actual facts of the case.”

Doc looked at Cilla.

“You done ranting yet, Doc?”

“I am, for the time being at least. Are you?”

“Like you said, for the time being.”

The two of them looked at the Marshal.

“Ditto,” he said, “now lay it all out for us in words a lowly lawman like me can understand.”

Johnny chose his words carefully and retold the episode from the moment he was first aware of the angry voices at the creek until he was parading down Main Street with Butler over the back of his horse.”

“I see,” the Marshal said – the first to speak after Johnny had finished.

“Could have been worse, of course,” Cilla said, back peddling a bit from her initial outburst.

“Looks like you did what had to be done,” Doc added nodding his understanding if not his agreement with what Johnny had done.

Johnny looked around.

“You yell at me for five minutes not knowing the facts and once you get them there are no apologies?”

The Marshal answered.

“I guess we figure there have been lots of times you’ve done dumb things that we didn’t know about, that we should have been yelling at you for, so just accept all that as a slightly delayed – though thoroughly deserved – dressing down.”

“I suppose I can’t honestly disagree with any of that so alright – consider it accepted.”

Doc looked at Cilla and then at the Marshal.

“That was far too easy, you know. He still has something up his sleeve.”

The others nodded and leaned in toward Johnny, looking for more.

“Like I said, I’m pretty sure I know where to find the Crimson Bandit but, because you always caution me not to go off halfcocked in such matters, I will withhold my speculation for just awhile longer.”

“And in the meantime, he gets away?” the Marshal said/asked, clearly still upset.

“I doubt that, but then, like you’ve indicated, I’m just an inept, wet behind the ears kid – what do I know?”

He knew he had pushed it pretty far – he hoped not too far. He slipped money to Doc under the table and excused himself.

“I need to let Aunt Bea know that I’m alright before she hears rumors to the contrary. It is my studied opinion that tomorrow will be the day we discover and expose the identity of the Crimson Bandit. By the way, Marshal, did you notice the stranger on the black horse in town earlier?”

“My deputy did. He checked with Will later and nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Will mentioned you were interested in him. You know something we don’t?”

“Probably not. Just checking on the overall vigilance of our local law enforcement service.”

“Johnny, I declare, sometimes you are positively exasperating (maddening),” the Marshal said.

“Good word – exasperating. I’m thinking the Crimson Bandit probably knows its meaning as well.”

While the three adults shook their heads and snorted back and forth among themselves across the table, Johnny left. Outside he spoke with a deputy.

“Butler’s horse needs caring for at the livery stable. Want me to take it up there?”

“I was just on my way to do that. Thanks though. Nice work, by the way, kid.”

“Thank you. Finally, an astute citizen who can just offer a simple thank you without skinning me first.”

Clearly the deputy didn’t understand, but gave no indication of really wanting things to be clarified. Johnny

saddled up and headed home.

The sun was directly overhead in a cloud-free sky. It was hot. He gave Diablo his head but, using good judgment, the horse chose to just walk. They stopped at the creek where they both cooled off in the gently flowing water before arriving home.

Johnny filled his aunt in about his morning's activities trying to make it sound like a well thought through, fully safe, undertaking. She gave him a single raised eyebrow – her signal she wasn't buying it – but said no more about it.

He spent most of the afternoon working on the story. He was finally certain he knew how it was going to turn out – he just had to arrange things so everything would fall into place according to the necessary timeline.

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## CHAPTER NINE

The next morning at the restaurant the others noticed that Johnny seemed down – blue – sad – out of sorts – distant.

“Hey, Johnny, we depend on you to be our early morning ray of sunshine,” Cilla said trying to help him get back on track.

Johnny forced a smile, but couldn’t maintain it.

“I finished my story last night.”

“Really?” Doc asked. “I thought that had to wait until the mystery of the Crimson Bandit was solved.”

“It did. It has been. It is all right here.”

He pulled a number of pages from inside his shirt where he had been carrying them.

“So, are you going to read it to us?” the Marshal asked.

“No. I’d rather you read it for yourselves.”

He handed the sheets to Cilla who was sitting to his right. The others ate. Cilla finished and passed it on to Doc. When he finished, he handed it to the Marshal.

When the Marshal finished, he looked at Doc.

“Is it possible – what he has in the story?”

“Hypothetically, you understand, yes, it is possible if not

probable.”

“I suppose we need to confront the man, then,” the Marshal said.

“I think it will go down easier if we all go together,” Johnny said. “You guys have all known him for some time.”

The others nodded and quickly finished their meals.

Ten minutes later they entered the saloon – through the front door. Frank, the owner, who had been away a lot recently, was sitting at the bar talking with Will.

“Frank,” the Marshal began. “We have some business here. It concerns the thief that has become known as the Crimson Bandit.”

Frank stood up and backed away several steps. Whether it was some sort of defensive move or just a gesture to make room for the others was not immediately apparent.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“It’s all here in my story,” Johnny said laying it on the bar and flattening it out with the palm of his hand.

“I think it’s time you read it out loud,” the Marshal said addressing Johnny.

Johnny sighed looking back and forth between Frank and Will. Frank continued to look puzzled. Will broke a slight smile and folded his arms, casting a quick glance in Frank’s direction. He remained seated on the stool behind the bar.

Johnny looked at Doc. Doc nodded to reassure him he needed to go ahead with the story.

Johnny began.

The Mystery of the Crimson Vigilante by Johnny Baker.

He looked up and explained: The name changed slightly to reflect the true nature of the bandit. He looked back down at the sheets and continued.

The stagecoach, drawn by four powerful horses – a white, a brown, a black and a gray – moved down the narrow road at an easy pace. There were still fifteen miles to cross before they came to the next town and the team was feeling

the effects of four hours under the unrelenting heat of the early June, Kansas sky.

The bright orange sun looked large in the cloudless sky above. The day was sweltering hot and that area of Kansas had not been blessed with so much as the hint of a breeze for a full month. The dust, which was lifted into the air by the tall, narrow, iron rimmed, wheels, dropped immediately back onto the road as if eager to return to its comfortable place atop the hardened mud surface.

Inside, there were three passengers – a beautiful lady who smelled wonderful, a fat old man who didn't and was plainly irritated when spoken to, and a handsome young man with a wonderful smile – a relatively young teenager who, although he usually enjoyed new experiences found himself bored out of his skull during what had become a very long and monotonous ride home.

Suddenly, the sound of a six shooter rang out – a single shot. The stage shook as the driver flicked the whip over the backs of the horses to urge them to pick up their pace.

A second and third shot were heard. The stage slowed and stopped. The boy looked out the window. The driver and the man riding shotgun were spread eagle on the ground, faces down.

There he was, sitting tall in the saddle astride a beautiful, black horse. He was dressed in black and crimson with a narrow black mask covering his eyes and nose. Without any doubt, it was the Crimson Vigilante!

It was not his first robbery and, as it turned out, would not be his last. His voice was clear and deep and his language impeccable (perfect).

“Boy. Please bring the man's valise out here and secure it to my pack horse.”

The boy did as he had been instructed. There were a set of short ropes on the back of the pack horse arranged to accept the valise. The boy tied them tightly and stepped back. The Crimson Vigilante motioned the boy back aboard the coach. He gently closed the door after him and spoke a



second time addressing everyone.

“The boy will count slowly to five hundred. No one is to move until he finishes. I am truly sorry for this inconvenience and any apprehension it may have caused.”

He bent close to the boy and whispered:

“Soon you will understand that I am really not the despicable human being I may appear to be. Have a safe journey.”

He then looked at the boy one more time, tipped his hat, and rode off into a stand of trees not ten yards to the north of the road.

As soon as he was out of sight, the driver moved to stand. Another shot rang out. It was enough to return the driver to his position on the ground.

At the count of five hundred everybody stirred. The woman began fanning herself. The man craned his neck as if expecting to be able to see the masked bandit out the window. He couldn't. The driver and his helper got to their feet, brushed the dirt from their shirts and pants and mounted the seat, getting the coach under way again.

There were nearly a dozen other robberies that could be recounted. Each one was essentially the same. Nobody was ever hurt. Only one thing was ever taken and the bandit knew exactly where to find it.

The boy, we'll call him Johnny, was something of a mystery solver and so could not resist following up on the case. He appreciated the assistance of the country doctor, the newspaper editor and the Marshal. Several questions came to his mind. How did the bandit know what he was after? How did he know who would have it? Why did he make himself stand out so from the run of the mill highwaymen in the area – wearing crimson boots, leather, shirt, and hat band over black shirt and trousers? He wanted to be remembered, that's why! But what was it to accomplish?

One answer could have been that he wanted to make a name for himself. Another that he wanted to make sure no other bandit would be blamed for his doings. Maybe both.

As Johnny researched the case using articles from newspapers in the area and wanted posters that came to the Marshal's office, he began formulating a picture of the man and the reason behind the robberies.

Here are the educated hunches Johnny had soon assembled. The man was out to right wrongs others had committed. Therefore, it made sense to assume the articles and money that he stole did not belong to the victims of his robberies – those folks had themselves stolen it from others. Because the bandit decided to take things into his own hands, rather than working with the lawmen in the territory, suggested that for him, time was in some way limited; if he didn't take care of things immediately he wouldn't be able to take care of them. The legal process would take more time than he cared to allow (or could allow).

What sort of things might limit his time? Only one thing made sense to Johnny – the Crimson Vigilante believed his life was limited by illness. That also lent credence to the fact he didn't seem to mind standing out from other bandits. He did cover his face – probably so he would not be caught before he was able to carry out the missions he had set for himself.

The man would work in a position where he met lots of people – like a teacher or a lawman or a preacher or the owner or employee of a business, which had lots of people go through it every day. He spoke with the people and skillfully directed the conversations to uncover the kinds of information he needed – who had recently stolen what from whom?

Then, he found ways to contact the thieves. He offered them – probably by letter since that was strictly private – some sort of deal in which they would be able to trade their loot for something untraceable. He set up meetings. It was why all the robberies took place near Red Bend – the victims were on their way to meet the Vigilante and make the trade, when he stood them up, instead, and took what they had.

Articles in the newspapers disclosed stolen items being returned to those from whom they had been stolen and anonymous gifts given to local charities in towns that had

encountered multiple robberies. As his investigation continued, it became fully apparent to Johnny that the Crimson Vigilante had as his mission the returning of the stolen property to the original victims.

There are several things about this Vigilante that played parts in his strategy. He was very sick and he knew that. He wanted to stay in the place that had a doctor that he trusted would be able to help him through his final months of life. Also, as a child, a ruthless gang of outlaws had killed his parents so he knew the anguish thieves could cause to others. He hoped to ease that if only a little, after the fact, by returning what had been taken.

This Vigilante was an intelligent and clever man. He hid his horses in the cave behind the waterfall on Sunday Creek. It was close enough to town for easy access to an ailing man and was safe because it was generally unknown to people in the area. His mounts needed to be strong and faster than any in the territory – and they were. They were magnificent horses – too magnificent to be generally available in the area where he operated. He used his connection with the French wife of the owner of a local ranch to import them for him.

He also used information from her to arrange for a rearrangement of jobs for several people – the current ranch cook being given a large sum of money to quit and say he was going to California, and the rancher receiving information that a first-class cook was available right there locally. Those things allowed him to step in as the replacement at the business where he had worked.

Johnny believed he had known almost from the beginning who the Crimson Vigilante was. He just needed time to accumulate the facts that set everything in place.

At the robbery of the stage on which Johnny had been riding, the bandit leaned close to the boy and spoke in low tones. The man's breath had a strange odor – fruity. It is one of the signs of diabetes mellitus – sadly a disease that is almost always fatal within a few years. The man returned to live out his life under the care of his trusted doctor who had

diagnosed the presence of the disease six or so years before. The bandit understood his life was coming down to just a few precious months.

By chance, while trying to sniff the remnants of another man's perfumed soap, Johnny, instead, smelled the barkeeper's breath – the same fruity odor as the Crimson Vigilante. Taking an inventory of some of the man's other personal traits – lost weight, avoidance of sugar (alcohol), problems with his hands, slow to heal, and a continual state of exhaustion, Johnny completed the diagnosis. Some of those things probably accounted for why he had asked Johnny to get the valise and tie it in place on his pack horse – his hands unable to tie the ropes, the strength needed to lift the valise and such things.

Since the Vigilante never hurt anybody, and, in fact to the boy's way of looking at it only really helped folks who had been wronged, Johnny took his time in developing the clues and the proof he needed. Then, one morning in mid-June, he entered the saloon with his friends and handed his story to the bartender – the Crimson Vigilante.

\* \* \*

Will nodded and offered Johnny his hand.

"Fine detective work, Johnny. You seem to have every detail correct. You must all understand that I harbor no guilt about what I've done. I imagine many of the wrongs I tried to right would have eventually worked themselves out in a proper way through the legal system. I am a selfish and impatient man. I wanted the satisfaction of knowing they had been righted during my lifetime."

He turned to the Marshal. "I'm all yours, I guess, Marshal."

The Marshal took Doc aside and they talked back and forth in low tones for several minutes. It was an intense and animated conversation. The Marshal then turned back to Will. His tone was strong and direct.

"William Miller, you are under arrest for an assortment of robberies which will be stipulated later. You will deliver to

me all the information you have regarding other unsolved robberies about which you have collected adequately incriminating information.”

Will nodded, apparently agreeing to the requests.

At that point the Marshal’s voice changed exhibiting a softer, more kindhearted tone. He continued.

“Unfortunately, my jail doesn’t have the medical facilities you need, so – and pay attention now – you are directed to give yourself up to me, at my office, at ten a.m. on January first of next year. Do you understand?”

Will’s face, along with the others in the room, acquired a puzzled look, quickly replaced by one of understanding and appreciation. Tears flowed down Will’s cheeks. He nodded.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Thank you all.”

The others immediately understood what had just taken place. During their quiet conversation, Doc confirmed Johnny’s hunch, that Will had no more than six months to live. The Marshal had devised a way to end the case on the side of RIGHT while also upholding the law. Will had been charged under the law, but would never have to see the inside of a jail cell.

Oddly, it seemed to the citizens of Red Bend, the case of the Crimson Bandit was never solved, but just faded away. Will continued to spend his days at the saloon happily talking with the folks who came and went, from time to time learning useful things he passed on to the Marshal.

Johnny’s story took a great deal of revision, but in the end, was published as a very well received action/adventure story in three papers with Will the hero and his identity fully protected.

And, oh yes, would you believe Cal’s first name was actually, Aloysius [Al-o-wish-us]? It was something Johnny’s good detective skills had learned, but his good sense would never allow him reveal – so, don’t tell anybody!

The End