



THE RED BEND BANK ROBBERY

Doc and Johnny's Old West Mysteries: Book 2

Red Bend Newspaper

Doc Weber, MD

By David Drake

The Red Bend Bank Robbery

**Book Two in the Series:
*Doc and Johnny's Old West Mysteries***

[Best if read in order]

By

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Family of Man Press

Book One: Johnny's Secret

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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. Horseback and buckboards were the primary means of local transportation and the railroad had only recently connected the east coast with the west coast. The stagecoach, although replaced by trains in most places on the two coasts, was still the necessary choice for long distance travel through many remote parts of the plains states.

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

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

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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).

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CHAPTER ONE: The Carnival's Coming!

It was October and Johnny had been a ninth grader since the first of September. Since Red Bend didn't have an official high school program Doc and Cilla had worked out an arrangement where he attended school two days a week and worked on assignments on his own, with their help as needed, the rest of the week. He was becoming comfortable with the routine.

With October came *Red Bend Days* – a week of rodeo, sharpshooting, stunt riding, horse races and carnival booths designed to astound and amaze. It was also a time when pick pockets, con men and other undesirables found their ways into town. The Marshal added a half dozen deputies and an overflow jail cell was set up behind the Marshal's office. Even as late as 1880, central Kansas was a rough and tumble part of the country where many men still wore side arms and saloons offered card games, beautiful waitresses and watered down drinks.

The celebration began on Monday and ran through Saturday. It was the Friday before the big event. The seventh and eighth graders were setting up a lemonade stand. Johnny had been invited to help – Clair was in eighth grade.

Hundreds of people came to town for the celebration. The hotel was always full as were the rooms above the saloon. Most of the homes in town rented out rooms. A tent city sprang up along the creek east of town. Older boys set up temporary corrals and tended to the visitor's horses for a dime a day each. The women of the church served three meals a

day.

It was a major money maker for lots of folks there in Red Bend. In a good year, there would be one thousand visitors who each spent on the average ten dollars during the week. That came to about fifty dollars per family who lived there. Some men made little more than that in an entire year.

It was a time when the bank handled a great deal of money. The bank president, Mr. Yeager, put on extra guards. Johnny appreciated that because he had an account there with about \$20.00 in it – a considerable amount for that time. The carnival people took care of their own money – a heavy paymaster wagon with solid four inch walls and eight-inch floor and roof. Inside, reportedly, was a huge iron, safe and numerous smaller lockboxes. Once in place at a carnival site, wooden panels were dropped from the floor to the ground to keep anybody from getting underneath it. Although it was not large, it was so heavy that as it moved from town to town it took a team of four, large horses to pull it.

The Marshal had gotten wind that a robbery had possibly been planned for that week. He knew no more than that – not the target, not the day, not any information about the robbers. Johnny overheard him speaking about it with his deputies. He didn't let on that he had heard. He went directly to Doc's place above the newspaper office.

"Doc. Got something. Could be big."

"And hello, to you, also. How am I? Oh, I am fine. Thank you for asking," Doc said teasing his young friend about his abrupt entry.

"Yes. All that. I just overheard the Marshal say he's expecting some sort of robbery to occur next week."

"Nothing more specific than that?"

"Doesn't seem to be. He sounded pretty concerned."

"You might want to ask Cilla if she has any information about robberies following either the rodeo group or the carnival group that will be here. I have those names here somewhere."

"It's *Roland's Rodeo* and *The Gypsy King's Carnival*," Johnny said supplying the information. "That's a real good idea – about Cilla. I'll stop at her office when I leave here. I really came by for that final checkup you said you wanted to

give me from the bullet I took to the chest a few months back.”

Johnny unbuttoned his shirt in preparation. He hopped up on the examination table. Doc took a look.

“The wound has healed completely. You’ll always have that scar. The bullet really tore up your skin on its way inside. Any soreness,” he said pressing here and there.”

“None at all.”

“Let’s see you clap your hands above your head. No pain?”

“None.”

“How about ten pushups?”

Johnny was immediately on the floor and completed twenty.

“Show off!” Doc said in his make-believe gruff voice. “I pronounce you fully recovered and fit to put your arm around a girls’ waist as you walk along the creek.”

“Too late. Already tried that and I do seem to be fully capable of it.”

“You are really fond of Clair, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am and she me, I’m quite certain. Aunt Mae and I talked about it and I understand Clair’s probably just the first of several girls I’ll be attracted to before I get ready to choose one to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Good for you and Aunt Mae. It might be well for you understand that it is often the girl who actually does the choosing.”

“Really? What’s this world coming to?”

Doc chuckled.

“Need anything? I’m in town ‘til noon,” Johnny asked as he started toward the door.

“I do believe I have my life in order for the remainder of the day. Jake Alsip’s wife is expecting any day. I may swing by for you if I get a call. It’s out your way and you are always such good help with the kids and husband while the mother and I are busy getting a new life into the world.”

“Sure. I love to help that way. Sometimes I suspect that you are attempting to steer me toward the medical field instead of writing.”

“Anything that says a person could not do both?”

“I suppose not, but you realize you just confirmed my

suspicion.”

“You could have just asked, you know.”

“I know. I can ask you anything.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. Your dad have that ‘talk’ with you?”

“The birds and the bees you mean? It was the most awkward, embarrassing, uncomfortable fifteen minutes of my life – and his, I’m thinking. If what you’re really asking is if I have any questions, I assure you I will ask as they surface.”

“Alright, then. What’s on your agenda for the day?”

“Helping build the lemonade stand for Clair’s class. Then Diablo and I will practice for the horse race. The Marshal says I have a good chance of placing high. I think I’ll start down at Cilla’s and see what she knows about other robberies. So, you don’t need anything?”

“Just a Johnny sized hug before you go.”

“That goes without saying. My mother was a great hugger. My father was more reserved about it – at home sometimes but never in public. I’m not faulting him. It’s just how he was raised. I feel fortunate to have the chance to learn about the less restrained way it’s done out here.”

It was a great hug from both participants’ points of view.

Johnny was soon down stairs bending Cilla’s ear.

“So, is there any scuttlebutt about robberies following the rodeo or carnival that are coming to town?”

“An interesting opening volley (conversation starter) this morning. You heard something?”

“Overheard the Marshal talking.”

“I get a dozen papers from around the state. You’re free to look through them. I seldom get past the front pages anymore.”

Johnny spent some time paging through several of them and summarized what he found.

“Bank robberies in Lawrence and Emporia this month. The carnival group was in one of them at the time. Maybe just a coincidence.”

“I’ll see if I can find out anything more,” Cilla said. “You entering any of the events?”

“The mile race. Diab and I have been working out. He’s fast but has never run against any other horse in a race.

Not sure how he'll take to it. I really am working on that paper about the history of Kansas. It should be done on Tuesday after the Red Bend Days. School's out that week. Unbelievable. In Kansas City we hardly ever got a day off from school – Christmas. Out here most any celebration seems to call for it."

"I can't tell how you are assessing it – the way it is out here?"

"Oh, from the stand point of a kid I think it's great. From the standpoint of one's education, probably not so great."

"I have some orders for posters about the Carnival and Rodeo to get set and printed today. Do you have any time to help with that?"

"Sure. Working on the lemonade stand this morning, but then I'm free."

"Alright. How about one o'clock? Need to have them posted around town before sunset."

"I'll be here. When do the carnival and rodeo folks get to town?"

"They set up on Sunday. Big parade kicks it all off on Monday noon – rodeo participants, school kids, local horsemen – you name it. Then it's non-stop activities the rest of the week. Rodeo every night. Both professional talent that follows the rodeo from town to town and local men trying to win a dollar or so. Usually a professional wrestler that takes on all comers for some worthless prize. We draw the top marksmen from around the state for that competition. Tops off with the big race you'll be in on Saturday morning."

"I've never been a part of anything like this. I have attended the Circus several times. I won a bag of candy once tossing rings at moving ducks in a booth at the carnival that accompanied it."

"I think you'll enjoy it. Just remember – if it seems too good to be true it most likely is. Lots of con games will be going on. And, hold on to your wallet. Seems like every tenth person is a pickpocket."

"Sounds like the Marshal will be busy."

"Busier than when the herd drives come through and *that's* busy!"

“I guess I need to be on my way. Things to do.”

He spent the rest of the morning with the kids working on the stand. They also got out of school to work on that. So much for education, he thought. He had a good time. Most of the kids were likeable and had lots of things to teach him about living in a small frontier town – things he had no chance to learn about back in the city – hammers, saws, gardening, fishing, hiking, things like that. Very few of the skills he had picked up as a cultured city boy were things anybody could use out there – formal dancing, fencing, playing the French Horn, and the new game played with racquets and a hollow ball called tennis.

Johnny was home for lunch and filled in his Aunt Mae on the morning with the kids. She was pleased to hear how excited he was about his time with the other youngsters. It seemed to her it had taken him a long time to get started mixing with them. She suggested that sometime before the weather got any more wintery he could invite a few of his new friends out for a picnic. He would run that idea by Clair and make some plans. He had observed that boys and girls his age were allowed to go places together in groups without adult chaperones, but boy/girl couples were not. That was fine with him.

One o'clock found him back at the newspaper office. Copies of several posters had been dropped off to be re-set with appropriate changes in the name of the town and dates. He was getting quite fast at setting type for the paper. It was one of the first times he had worked with such a wide variety of type sizes for a single sheet. He found that far more fun.

The posters listed the attractions so he got a preview of what was on its way. It appeared to him one man owned both the rodeo and the carnival even though they were presented as separate groups. His name was Cappi Petulengro.

One poster was for Doctor Fantasma, an elixir (tonic/fake medicine) salesman and supposed healer.

“Fantasma?” Johnny said. “I’d like to see what it says on his birth certificate – probably John Smith. He been here before?”

“Not under that name, but those guys shed names like rattlers shed their skin.”

“He claims his potion will cure everything from warts to heart problems.”

“Doubt all that,” Cilla said, “but you can count on one thing. It will be the gosh awfulist tasting liquid anybody’s ever run across their taste buds.”

“I wonder why.”

“People are funny. They seem to think the worse it tastes the better it has to be for them. It’s a lot like life. The more effort it takes or the more one has to overcome the more important it becomes – the more one believes in it.”

Johnny didn’t fully understand, but he’d tuck it away for further thought.

“His poster says he’ll be arriving down Main Street from the east at three Saturday afternoon. I better get the posters spread around town. I feel sort of dirty doing it – like spreading a huge lie up and down the streets.”

“People have been given a brain to use in making decisions, Johnny. If they choose not to use it – to just accept what somebody else tells them without investigating its truth, I suppose it’s as much on them as it is on the liar.”

“Hadn’t thought of it like that. So, I’m really giving folks a chance to utilize their marvelous human brain. I can live with that.”

He grinned.

Cilla wasn’t sure that was what she had intended, but it seemed to work for Johnny. He left with the posters. After fifteen minutes, he had two left. He folded one for his pocket and took the other one up to Doc.

“Thought you’d want to know what your competition was up to,” he said with a smile as he handed the sheet to his aging friend.”

“Folks would probably be better off eating the flyer than drinking his elixir,” he said with a snort.

“But the ink is made with a lead base. Wouldn’t that make them sick?”

“It would if it didn’t kill them first.”

It really hadn’t been worth a chuckle but they shared a brief smile over it.

“Speaking of sick,” Johnny said, “one of the guests at the hotel said he’d just come in from Emporia and there was

an outbreak of some sort of stomach ailment down there. Folks dehydrated and two old people died. You know about that?”

“I didn’t. Let me jot down a telegram for Doctor Merritt down there and see if he can fill me in.”

Johnny took the note to the telegraph office and saw to it that it was sent immediately. He’d stop by later to see if there was a response.

He had ridden Diablo back to town after lunch and figured it was a good time to get him familiar with the course the race was going to take – east down Main Street and around the big oak in front of the Potter’s farm house and then back to the finish line at the Hotel – a mile in all. That day he wouldn’t be riding for speed – just for familiarity. He thought it would be a good strategy not to let the locals know how fast Diab really was. He’d give him his head on his way home later.

The horse loved to run full out and Johnny loved the way it felt with the wind in his face and the powerful animal surging beneath him. They did the course together a half dozen times with time to rest and drink in between. He had really missed the horse during the weeks before it had been delivered to him from Kansas City – all thanks to Cal Calvin, the Marshal.

On their final run to the oak that day, Johnny decided to just keep going for a while, letting Diab choose the path they’d follow. They slowed to a stop along the creek several miles east of town. Diab drank and Johnny dismounted and splashed himself with water. For an October day it had turned quite warm.

As he surveyed the area his eye caught a glimpse of a large spot of red in the woods just downstream. He led Diab in that direction. It was a large wagon with high wooden sides and roof making it suitable to live in. On the side was the message, *Dr. Fantasma’s Elixir of Life*. It went on to list two dozen maladies it was guaranteed to cure. A larger than life, full length painting of a most distinguished looking man in suit and top hat graced the far-right end of the colorful billboard on the side of the wagon.

A man approached on horseback from the direction of

town. Johnny stayed back among the trees. The 'Doctor' helped the man put several bottles of liquid into his saddle bags and also handed him several dollars. It seemed backward. Usually people gave the Doctor money for the bottles. Why would the Doctor be giving the man not only several bottles, but also several bills?

Johnny knew it really wasn't any of his business, but things that didn't immediately make sense always tweaked his attention. After the man left, he led Diablo closer and presently was offering his greeting to the man.

"You must be the famous medical man I've been reading about."

He removed the flyer from his pocket and showed it as if to prove his point.

"I am, and to whom am I having the privilege of speaking?"

"I'm Johnny. This is Diablo. We're entering the big race at Red Bend Days. Been out practicing."

"A fine-looking specimen, your Diablo. Are you interested in earning a quarter?"

"Maybe. That always depends in what's involved. "I'm not into illegal or hurtful things."

"Nothing like that. South of here, I traveled across a field of mud and my wagon became filthy. I will pay you to wash it for me."

"I can do that. You have a bucket and rags?"

"I do."

Johnny tethered (tied) Diablo to a nearby tree. He carried water from the creek and engaging the Doctor in conversation as he worked. A half hour later he was finished. As promised the man handed over a shiny new quarter. Johnny thanked him and was soon on his way back to town. It hadn't been that Johnny needed the money but he enjoyed meeting the enemy and he had the clear idea that Doctor Fantasma was the enemy.

He stopped at the telegraph office and picked up the message from Doc's friend in Emporia. He ran the steps and handed it to Doc.

"Doctor Merritt says he's treated half a dozen cases of gastric distress (stomach problems) in the past week. He also

says some snake oil salesman in a big red wagon came to town and treated several dozen more, then sold hundreds of bottles of his elixir to prevent the problem in others.”

“Was it serious?” Johnny asked.

“Apparently not. Says plain old baking soda cured the problems, but the distress was bend-you-over-in-the-middle-severe while it lasted. Looked like appendicitis initially.”

Johnny asked the meaningful question:

“So, was it fortunate for the town that Dr. Fantasma arrived just in time or was it fortunate for Dr. Fantasma that the town came down with an ailment his tonic could cure?”

Without intending to wait for an answer, Johnny related his time with the Fantasma character earlier.

“It didn’t mean anything just then, but there was what looked like a very recent addition at the bottom of his list of ailments he could cure and prevent – appendicitis. You think he is up to no good?”

“Those folks are *a/ways* up to no good; telling people with real problems – that can be cured if we get to them in time – that they can cure them with a dollar bottle of who knows what. People die taking that advice.”

“Sounds like we may have a mystery on our hands, Doc.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Or, maybe two – the illness and the robbery. We may be pretty busy next week.”

CHAPTER TWO:

Exactly as advertised, early Saturday afternoon the big red wagon pulled by the two beautiful white horses entered Main Street from the east. People had gathered, excited, really ready for the coming week's events, but willing to take whatever the day had to offer. It was actually a very clever marketing approach – catch lots of people who were all revved up to do something and present something for them to do – buy the magic elixir.

He stopped in front of the saloon and an assistant – the man he had given bottles and money to the day Johnny had been watching – unhitched the horses and led them some distance away. The seat folded down and became a platform – a mini-stage on which Dr. Fantasma stood – swaggered, actually, thumbs in his belt under his long coat.

Doc watched down at the proceedings from his front window. Cilla stood in front of her office. The Marshal and several of his deputies circulated through the crowd on the lookout for early arrival pickpockets.

Fantasma began with words of praise for the enterprising citizens of Red Bend and offered other phrases meant to endear him to them. He then listed a number of common and bothersome maladies everybody would have experienced – colds, sore throats, ear aches, and the like. He went on to describe more serious conditions from blindness to paralysis. It was at that point that he removed a bottle of his 'medicine' from his coat pocket and began telling how it had been shown to cure all those things and more. He said how he had sold thousands of bottles for five dollars apiece. He

said for that day only he was willing to sell to the good folks of Red Bend at his cost – only one dollar per bottle.

Now, one dollar was a large amount of money, but if in fact the regular price was five, it was hard to pass up such a bargain. After all, he had related that kings and queens and presidents had requested bottles for themselves and their loved ones. The citizens of Red Bend were generally a trusting lot who seldom lied themselves, so assumed others wouldn't either.

He had his patter (sales pitch) down pat, fine-tuned to appeal to the most basic need of the crowd – protect your loved ones from terrible sickness.

Elmer Smythe, the owner of the general store stepped forward.

“Since last night, my family and I have had terrible stomach pain. It may be appendicitis.”

“One bottle will cure you and your family before you can count to one hundred.”

Mr. Smythe handed over a dollar and received the tonic. He shared it with his two children, his wife, and finally himself. The terrible faces they each made upon taking the liquid into their mouths was full testimony to its potency. Dr. Fantasma began to count in a most dramatic fashion, raising and dropping his hand with every number. Before he reached ten the youngest child said his distress was gone. Immediately the others agreed that they, too, had been cured.

There is no testimonial like the one that comes from your good friend, and the owner of the general store was everybody's good friend. The men pressed close to the wagon waving bills in the air, eager to obtain their bottle.

Johnny figured over a hundred had been sold in a matter of fifteen minutes. He wondered how it worked – the elixir, not the con. He wondered how the man had gotten the store owner to participate – he was one of the wealthiest men in town. He had an idea.

While Fantasma continued his pitch, by then trying to get folks to purchase a second bottle – since he might never travel their way again – Johnny slipped away to the alley behind the general store. The owner and his family lived upstairs. They had a drinking water barrel on the platform at

the top of the outside stairway. It was kept full from the pump on the ground below.

Something was wrong. The spigot near the bottom was open and the water was running out. Johnny ran up the steps and turned it off. All but an inch or so had run out. There were several drinking cups hanging nearby from hooks in the side of the building. Johnny filled one and made his way to Doc's office.

"I have a theory that this drinking water has been tampered with – poisoned or some such thing to make the family sick. Can you find out?"

Doc sniffed it. He put his finger in it and touched it to his tongue.

"Strongly acidic. Smells like the bitter root plant. Doesn't take much of that to give one terrible gastric distress. I'm not equipped to analyze it."

"If it is acidic, then the soda your friend Dr. Merritt used over in Emporia would neutralize it, correct?"

"Correct."

"You have soda here?"

"Yes. Got in an extra supply yesterday just for the weekend."

Johnny put the cup to his mouth and drank it down.

"That was a darn fool thing to have done," Doc said, clearly upset at the boy's action.

"Only if it kills me," Johnny said with a grin. "Oh, oh. Whatever it is, it's fast acting. It really does produce an awful pain."

Doc continued to shake his head as he placed a teaspoon of baking soda into a glass of water and stirred it in. He handed it to Johnny, who by then felt the need to bend over and hold his stomach, the pain was so severe.

He drank the entire glassful. Doc, somewhat humorously, began the same count down motion with his hand that Fantasma had used before so dramatically down on the street.

By the count of ten, Johnny's pain was basically gone. He stood up straight.

"Wow! Like a real miracle," he said.

"If you pour vinegar into soda water it foams up and

overflows in a major way, correct?" he asked Doc.

"Correct."

"Got vinegar?"

Doc pointed to a cabinet.

"I'm going to need to borrow it for a few minutes."

With the vinegar in one hand and the empty tin cup in the other, he went flying down the stairs and headed right to the big red wagon. He mounted the front and stood there by Fantasma, addressing the crowd.

"If I may have your attention."

The crowd grew silent, wondering what was going on. Even the Marshal moved forward, closer to the wagon. Johnny handed over a dollar bill and was given a bottle. He turned back toward the crowd.

"You all know what happens when you add vinegar to baking soda or soda water. It foams up and immediately overflows whatever vessel you had it in."

The adults in the crowd nodded, looking back and forth among them, puzzled.

Johnny held up the elixir and poured some into the cup. He held up the vinegar and poured some into the cup. Immediately the cup foamed over and continued to for some time almost covering the little platform. A murmur went through the crowd. Johnny continued.

"The drinking water used by Mr. Smythe's family at the general store, was somehow contaminated with the acidic liquid from the bitter root plant and it caused the severe stomach aches. I just drank some from their water barrel and had the same reaction. Doc – *our* Doc Weber – had me drink a glass of water with a spoonful of baking soda in it and I was immediately cured. I can't say for sure that Dr. Fantasma had anything to do with contaminating the Smyths's water, but it does seem like quite a coincidence. It actually seems like a double coincidence that that this man cured the same stomach distress down in Emporia just last week."

The crowd became angry, demanding their money back. The Marshal stepped forward. Two of his deputies joined him. The Marshal turned to Dr. Fantasma.

"If I were you I'd get out of town immediately if not sooner. I'll keep the money box and make the refunds. We'll

protect your wagon and horses and see that they and any money that's left get to you later."

The man climbed down off the wagon and fast walked back the way he had come. His assistant had already left town in the other direction.

Johnny jumped to the ground. The Marshal picked up the money box and began the refunds – one dollar back for one bottle turned in. Johnny made his way to Mr. Smythe and returned the tin cup.

"You'll need to drain your water barrel and, I imagine, rinse it out quite thoroughly," Johnny said.

"Thank you so much for what you've done," Mr. Smythe said.

Others gathered around and offered handshakes and their own words of thanks.

When the crowd thinned out and most had left the street, he saw her – Clair standing on the walk near Doc's steps. She waved. He returned it and trotted to her.

"That was a very brave thing you did," she said.

"More well calculated than brave, I believe. I have great faith in modern medicine and, Doc, of course.

"Was the pain just terrible?"

"I've had lots worse."

He put his hand to his chest.

She nodded and offered him her hand.

"I need to get home. You can walk with me if you want to."

He walked her home. Several of her brothers met them in the front lawn and added their congratulations to those he had already received. Johnny felt very embarrassed. He had not considered how his actions were going to be viewed by the town's people. He was just solving a mystery – giving a bad guy his comeuppance (what was coming to him).

He wondered what in the World he had done – it certainly wasn't helping him be looked upon as just another regular person. He'd learn from it and from then on keep his activities less obvious, less out in the open. It also made him wonder if entering the race was such a good thing. What if Diablo turned out to be the fastest horse? He could always hold him back, of course, but that hardly seemed fair to Diab.

He had a week to think it over.

He left Clair's house and walked back toward Main Street to pick up Diablo from the livery stable. The alley provided the shortest route. There were several men ahead of him on horseback riding east through the alley. Johnny stopped to watch. The men slowed and stopped behind the bank. That got Johnny's attention. He slipped into the shadows between the stable and the Leather Shop.

It had been a good move since at that moment one of the men got off his horse while the others stood watch – one watching east and one west down the alley. The one who was on foot approached the rear door of the bank and looked it over. He then moved back and forth across the back of the two-story building giving it more than a casual looking over. He did the same at the rear of the building next door – the leather shop but Johnny was more drawn to the time he spent at the bank.

Presently, he remounted his horse and the three of them moved on east. Johnny made some mental notes. They all wore side arms – something the Marshal would not be permitting within the city limits during the festival. They all wore black hats and long coats – indicating they had come some distance by horseback. On the trails, such garb protected riders from the blowing dust and diverted the heat from the sun. In town, it was strictly shirt or shirt with light jacket weather.

The horses were young and were still well lathered, showing signs of a long ride just completed. The head man had silver fittings on his saddle and a silver buckle on his hat. They all carried bed rolls behind their saddles and a rifle fitted into a case in front of the right stirrup.

Johnny followed them. They turned toward Main and tied up in front of the saloon. Once they had entered, Johnny crossed the street to where the horses were hitched. He pretended to be admiring them while in fact he was loosening the strap on one of the saddle bags with silver trim. A quick glance inside suggested two dozen sticks of dynamite. He cinched it back up and turned around to the bag on the horse behind him. Among the usual things – a shirt, socks, and such – was a neatly folded section of newspaper. He removed

it and placed it inside his shirt, leaving the strap unfastened. He then moved up onto the wooden walk in front of the stores and moseyed (walked slowly) to a spot a few yards from the Marshal's office. He slid to the boards, back against the wall, and took out the paper. It was the front page from the *Emporia Reporter* – a newspaper from Emporia Kansas where a bank robbery had recently occurred.

The main story on page one covered that robbery, detailing the amount taken. It further stated that even though the money had been taken, no method of entry had been found. No windows had been broken. No doors had been jimmied. There had been no forced entry and no armed men entering and demanding money. It was still a mystery. So much for the TNT he located in the saddle bag, he thought. The robbery had been done at night on the last day of the carnival. It would have been the time when the most money would have been in the bank – at the end of the week-long money making event.

He wondered if he should share the article with the Marshal or hold onto it until he had more information. He decided to wait knowing Doc and Cilla would probably not have approved of that decision. He had a plan – well he sort of had sort of a plan.

He stood and returned to the Saloon to wait for the three men to exit. He took a seat on the bench out front and spread open the paper so it could not be missed. The men exited the building. One of them noticed the paper and approached Johnny.

“What you got there, kid?”

“This? Just a newspaper I found all folded up in the middle of the street out there. Reading about a bank robbery over in Emporia.”

The other men joined the first. The leader of the group noted the paper and hitched his head indicating the others should follow him back toward the horses. There was some heated conversation in low voices that Johnny could not make out. One of the men went directly to the saddle bag that had held the paper. He pointed to the strap that remained unfastened. Johnny hoped that would make it appear it had not been tied shut so the article could have fallen out.

Apparently, that's how they took it since they mounted up and rode west out of town.

Although it hadn't proved anything, it showed the paper had been important enough for them to go out of their way to check on it – not just some random newspaper that got lost. He headed back to the newspaper office to see if Cilla had the whole paper that article had been taken from. There just might be something else in it that would be of interest.

"I want to continue looking at the papers, Okay? Didn't really get finished before."

"Sure. Be my guest."

Cilla had come to know Johnny well enough to tell when the lad had something up his sleeve but she didn't pry. Cilla was patient.

He pawed through the stack of papers until he found the one he was looking for. He took it to the far end of the big table and began searching every article from the top left of page one to the bottom right of the back page – page 8 in that case.

There were articles about who won what at the various rodeo events, that big Tommy Thomas – the local favorite – got tossed out of the ring by the visiting wrestler ten seconds after the match began, and the article about the bank robbery. One other caught his attention although he couldn't see how it related to the robbery.

In the early morning hours, the night of the robbery, there had been an explosion at a mine entrance a quarter of mile east of town. It had been loud enough to be heard in town. The sky also lit up and caused several rumors about meteor landings. No cause had been established although the prevailing theory was that some old, unstable sticks of dynamite somehow got jarred and exploded - perhaps by some little critter searching the mine for food. Old TNT is very unstable and can explode just from being picked up. Whether meteor, TNT, or some other reason, the explosion didn't seem worthy of any follow-up. Well, none until Johnny came upon the report. He made immediate sense of it – a diversion set off by the bank robbers to get the sheriff out of town during the robbery. It still left the problem of how a bank could be robbed without being entered!

He put the paper back in the stack.

“Guess I’ll be on my way. Still have wood to chop at home.”

“Glad to hear you calling it home,” Cilla said. “Can’t be easy to have been uprooted from the city and set down out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“It hasn’t been easy. Once I stopped wondering when my life would get back to normal – it can never be like it was – and became determined to build a great life here in Red Bend, life suddenly got better in a hurry. This is home now and Aunt Bea is my family – well her and you and Doc and the Marshal.”

“I’m honored to be included in your family, Johnny. Which reminds me I have some wood that needs chopping as well.”

It had been a little joke and Johnny understood that. His parents had provided well for him but there hadn’t been much humor in the home. He was becoming used to it and enjoyed and appreciated it. Both Doc and Cilla were quick with the jokes. The Marshal not so much although he always seemed to enjoy them.

He saddled Diablo and mounted up thinking he would get on home and finish his chores. As he nudged his horse out onto the street he turned west rather than east – it was the way the three men had left town. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to spend a half hour or so seeing if they had made camp or moved on.

After a ten-minute ride, he saw a tall wisp of smoke coming from the wooded area to the south. He figured it was somebody’s campsite. He dismounted and led Diablo into the stand of trees. Twenty yards into the woods he spied a clearing. He stayed hidden and surveyed the area.

In the clearing was the small camp fire. Around the camp fire were the three men drinking coffee and eating jerky. They had set up a tent indicating they were there for more than the night – bedrolls would have been the case if that had been the plan.

The horses were tethered on a line tied between two trees. The three men were set up for a long stay. One of the horses whinnied as it caught the boys scent – or that of Diablo

– so Johnny quickly retreated to the road and headed for home in earnest.

On the surface, nobody else would think twice about it – three men had just come to the area to enjoy Red Bend Days. Maybe they would enter rodeo events or the marksmanship contest or the big race.

Johnny, however, saw things differently. He was sure they were the bank robbers – they were strangers in town after a long ride, they had cased the rear of the bank, they had the article about the Emporia robbery, they had at least one saddle bag loaded with sticks of dynamite to set up the diversion, and they chose to stay out of sight in the woods rather than in town close to the events. Johnny was sure they were the robbers. Johnny was also sure that without any proof he couldn't really share his suspicion with any of his adult friends.

After he got the wood chopped and stacked inside and out, there was still time for a short swim before supper. He was hot, sweaty and covered with dusty grime from his time on the trail. He had noticed that recently his sweat had acquired an unpleasant smell and he took great care to keep clean so he wouldn't offend Clair or his other friends. A short swim each day seemed to take care of it. He wondered what he'd do once the cold weather of fall and winter blew in. He'd figure something.

As he started back to the house he noticed a lone rider approaching on the road from town. He stopped to watch as it turned and started up the lane. As it neared, Johnny saw it was Cal, the Marshal. He waved his hat above his head. Cal did the same in return.

"What you doing out this way at this time of day, Marshal?"

"Heading down to West Fork and wondered if you'd like to ride along."

"Sure would. Need to check in with Aunt Bea. Supper's waiting. Sure, there's plenty for an extra plate."

"That's what I was counting on. Smelled her apple pie from clean out on the road."

Conversation always flowed easily between Bea and Cal – she had known him since he was knee high to a

grasshopper, as she put it. She always had stories to tell about him as a boy and he had a few to share about her as well.

After the meal, the men did the dishes over Aunt Bea's protests. The conversation continued as she picked up her knitting – Christmas presents in the making.

Johnny fixed a bedroll and loaded his saddle bags with just the essentials – hard rolls, a jar of honey, jerky and the cookies that were left in the cookie jar.

"Will I need the rifle?" he asked hoping the answer would be yes.

It wasn't.

"Nope. Not expecting any trouble."

They were soon on their way.

"So, why the late-night ride south to West Fork?"

"Been a bank robbery down there. Cilla tells me you have a sudden interest in such things and I figured it would be better for you to go with me than take off by yourself in the morning."

"So, what you're really saying is that you feel the need to spend some quality time with great young conversationalist like me."

"If you say so."

Smile met smile as they glanced into each other's faces. The Marshal often made excuses to spend time with Johnny feeling the lad needed a man in his life.

It was a four-hour ride. It would put them in town at about ten. Johnny had to wonder why it was so important they needed to go immediately.

"When was the robbery?"

"Last night. The bank president discovered all the money was gone this morning. I received a telegram about it this noon. Been busy 'til this evening getting the new deputies ready for next week."

"I have several ideas about it, but I'd rather wait and elucidate after we get the facts."

"Elucidate? Sounds like one of Doc's words."

"Cilla's, actually. Means *explain*."

"I know what it means – just surprised to hear it cross you lips."

"I figured we were beyond that?"

"Beyond what?" Cal asked.

"You being surprised about anything I say or do."

"I suppose that's right, really. You are a *oner*."

"Oner? Not familiar with the term," Johnny said.

"Unique, distinctive, *one* of a kind."

"Got it. That a frontier term, is it?"

"Actually, I learned it from an English nobleman who passed through a few years ago. He carried a sabre, wore a helmet, and rode a camel."

"A *oner*, himself, it seems."

"He was that – right down to his name."

"Which was?"

"Colonel Meriwether Cuddlebottoms."

"I guess my simple Johnny Baker isn't so bad after all. I used to wish I had some high class sounding name."

Cal smiled.

"If you want a high-class name I suppose I could begin calling you Cuddlebottoms."

"Don't you dare! Never! Anywhere! Ever. Understood?"

The Marshal raised his eyebrows but didn't really answer.

They made good time and tied up in front of the deputy's office at exactly nine forty-five. By nine fifty they had heard the basic story about the robbery – no armed hold up and no breaking and entering. By nine fifty-five Johnny had asked his fully unexpected question.

"How far from town was the explosion that occurred at about one a.m.?"

The deputy looked at the Marshal, clearly puzzled.

"I didn't say anything about that in my telegram."

"No, you didn't," Cal confirmed.

As one they turned toward Johnny.

"I think it's time for my young trail pal to spill the beans."

CHAPTER THREE

Johnny was ready to spill the beans – explain his thinking.

“I’ve been doing some research – in the newspapers Cilla takes. I ran across the juxtaposition (overlapping) of the explosion and the time of the robbery over in Emporia. A few other things, too, but they can wait.”

“I don’t yet know how the robbery itself was pulled off, but it clearly requires that people remain at some distance from the bank building. I assume that however they do it, is noisy or in some other way would draw attention if people were present nearby.”

“You could have shared that with me on the ride,” the Marshal said.

“But wasn’t it more dramatic this way?”

“Yes. I’ll give you that.”

The Marshal turned to the deputy.

“When can we examine the bank?”

“Anytime,” the deputy said. “The banker said he would be available on a moment’s notice. I’ll go fetch him. Meet you in front of the bank in five minutes.”

“Can we make that *behind* the bank?” Johnny asked. “I believe that’s the place to start.”

The Marshal shrugged.

“Behind the bank, it will be, then.”

In the alley behind the bank Johnny went right up to the building. He looked in the window like the man had done earlier up in Red Bend. He tried the door and attempted to raise the windows like the man had done. Truth be known, he

had no idea what he was looking for. The man had not seemed to find anything either. Maybe that was good.

Then he remembered that before he mounted up, the man in Red Bend had moved to the building just to the east of the bank and had tried the door. In fact, as Johnny's memory began bubbling up in his mind, he remembered one other thing – the man took what looked to be a key from his vest pocket and tried it in the door. Well, he really couldn't see all those details, but that's what the motions seemed to suggest. The door had not been opened so he had no real way of knowing if it fit or not, but perhaps all the man needed to know was that it fit and turned.

Johnny had a question for the deputy.

"What is that building just to the east?"

"Jake's Barrel Shop – makes kegs and barrels, mostly for the feed stores in the county. Had a fire in there last spring and had to have the inside rebuilt. For a while we thought both it and the bank would go up in flames."

"I guess we can go on into the bank, now," Johnny said.

Again, the Marshal shrugged and nodded at the deputy. At that moment, the door was pulled opened from the inside by Mr. Somers, the bank president who had entered through the front. They methodically examined each window and door for signs of forced entry. They found nothing.

"May we see the vault?" Cal asked.

The big iron door was soon swung open and they looked inside. It wasn't large, but the four of them could stand inside together with comfortable elbow room between them. Again, they examined things. It was clear the vault door had not been tampered with. Its hinges were set into the sides of the doors so they couldn't be tampered with from the outside. The, thick, iron frame in which the door sat was also intact – not sawed - not drilled - not damaged in any way.

"The floor?" Cal asked.

"Two feet of concrete reinforced with iron rods," came the president's response. "Nobody tunneled up through that."

The editorial comment hadn't really been needed. They could see the floor was as it should be – smooth, gray, hard, and easily looked its twenty years of age.

"Ceiling?"

It had been another of the Marshal's well-trimmed questions.

"Three inches of solid iron in one single sheet. It cost me an arm and a leg to have it shipped out here from Pennsylvania."

"Sides?"

"Three columns of the hardest brick known to man. The sides and ceiling are bolted together from the inside – he pointed – and the three rows of bricks along the bottom of the walls are bored and bolted to foot long bolts sunk into the concrete floor."

Johnny had another question.

"What about the wooden shelving all around the back and two side walls?"

"Well, standard, heavy duty, shelves, I suppose. Sam Dalton, the local carpenter at the time, special made them to fit in here. As you can see they are made from sturdy two by twelves all around – sturdy to hold heavy, iron, lockboxes and the occasional gold shipment. They have one by eight inch, tongue and groove, board backs. I spared no expense as you can see."

"Looks a lot like the bank vault up at Red Bend," Cal said examining the shelves.

"An exact replica from the floor to the ceiling and brick walls. Used the very blueprints that had been used up there. It was my older cousin's bank at the time – the one up at Red Bend."

Johnny took it all in and would think about it later on. He bent down and ran his hand over the floor near the back wall.

"Floor's solid as granite, I'd say," was his take on it. "A mystery to me."

He stood and examined the shelves – particularly what he could see of the wooden backs. He ran his fingers over the nail heads and nodded.

Cal spoke.

"I hate to even mention it but it looks like an inside job – somebody with a key to the building and who knew the combination to the vault. Anybody come to mind?"

"Me. I mean, I am the only one with keys and only I

know the combination. Are you suggesting I robbed my own bank, Marshal?"

"Oh, no. But it seems to be the only logical explanation. Could anybody else possibly have access to the key and combination – somebody at your home, perhaps?"

"No, sir. Well, there is a copy of the combination in my will, but my lawyer has the only copy of that and it's in a sealed envelope. I put it in that Document so if anything happened to me the vault could be opened without having to damage it."

"I think we need to speak with your lawyer," the Marshal said.

The deputy was soon on his way to bring in John Bates, the only attorney in town. His thin, white, hair, the brown spots on his arms, and his wrinkled, long narrow hands told Johnny he had probably seen sixty-five some years back.

"I understand you have the only copy of Mr. Somer's will," Cal said. "Is there any chance anybody other than you has had access to it?"

"I sincerely doubt it. It's in my lockbox here in the bank."

Johnny had to smile. The purpose of having the combination in his will was so the vault could be opened if he died, and the only copy of that will was locked inside the vault. Grownups aren't always so smart, after all!

The problem escaped the banker and the deputy, but Cal got the message. It deserved another eyebrow raising in the direction of Cuddlebottom's – I mean, *Johnny*.

"Will you check and make sure the copy of the will is here and still sealed in the envelope?" the Marshal asked.

It was soon done and found to be safe and sound. The president re-glued the envelope and returned it to the lockbox for safekeeping.

[There would be no search for fingerprints, since that would not start being used in criminal investigations until after 1892 (and that would begin, first, in Argentina).]

With the Document safe and sound there in the bank, it did open up a number of new suspects – the lawyer, himself, and the bank employees who would not have been suspects if the will had stayed at Mr. Bates' office. If, however, the

several bank robberies were connected, it would be someone other than a local bank employee.

Those thoughts gave Johnny an idea and he formulated it into a question for the deputy.

"I assume the carnival and rodeo people have made it at least this far by now, right? They are due up in Red Bend tomorrow."

"They have camped just northeast of town near the bend in the creek. Been there several days, now. Bought out the general store of most everything. Got a special supply wagon coming in the morning."

Johnny looked at Cal. What he was thinking needed to be just between the two of them.

"We ready to leave, then, Marshal," he asked, nodding ever so slightly as a signal for his big friend.

"I suppose so. We can be at the bluff on the creek by midnight. That's a good camping spot. Then we can get a early start in the morning."

They said their goodbyes and the Marshal gave his deputy some instructions for follow up on the robbery. They were soon back on the trail north.

"So, why you wantin' to get out of town so soon?" Cal asked.

"I've made a couple of other connections I wanted to lay out for you."

"Oh. Like?"

"Like the rodeo and carnival has been in many of the towns that get their banks robbed, for one."

"That could be a coincidence," Cal said. "They bring in lots of money to each community. Puts lots of money in those banks. That makes it a prime time for a robbery. Maybe a band of thieves just follows along the shows."

"I suppose. A very clever band of thieves. Any ideas about how they do it?"

"Just that one – an inside job."

"In every case? There have been what – five robberies in the past two months? That's a lot of coincidences if you ask me."

"Maybe they – the thieves – come along ahead of time and buy the services of some employee," the Marshal

suggested, really thinking out loud. “Bank tellers and accountants don’t really make much money. Some could probably be bought off.”

“That’s probably possible, but I’m still thinking there’s a connection with Cappi Petulengro.”

“Cappi who?” Cal asked.

“Cappi Petulengro. He owns both the rodeo and the carnival, but tries hard to make it look like they are run by different people. A Gypsy name if I’m not mistaken – and I’m not often mistaken.”

“You know something specific about this Cappi fellow?”

“Like?”

Johnny threw it back at Cal like Cal often did to him.

“Like, convictions for bank robbery comes to mind first off.”

“Well, no. But I haven’t really even got started investigating him.”

“Let me know when you have something more than speculation.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” he offered flashing a grin.

They made camp at the bluff and were soon asleep. It had been a long hard day for both of them.

Johnny awoke the next morning with a hand clamped over his mouth. He looked up more than a bit startled. It was Cal who released his hand and made the universal quiet signal with his finger to his lips. He pointed east into the sun. Someone – small in stature – was walking toward them, a rifle, perhaps, over his shoulder. He had not yet seen them.

They remained stretched out on the ground. When the person got to within twenty yards, Cal stood, gun drawn.

“Stop, you. Put down your rifle.”

“This?” came the voice of a boy about Johnny’s age. “It’s just a stick. Carrying it hoping to bash a rabbit’s head in for breakfast. Guess they’re all sleeping in. I haven’t seen any yet.”

Johnny stood and walked toward the young man, offering his hand.

“I’m Johnny.”

The boy accepted the shake.

“I’m Abbot.”

“What you doing out here all alone at daybreak?”

“Like I said, looking for breakfast.”

Cal interrupted.

“Where you live, son?”

“I’m with the Carnival. We’re camped a few miles east. I’m sort of a loner – not a good trait for a Gypsy. Gypsies are all about spending time with family and friends. I guess I’m sort of a outcast.”

“Meaning the others don’t want to be with you and since you don’t want to be with them, that should be working out pretty well, I’d think,” Johnny said trying to put a positive spin on it.

Abbot broke a broad grin and nodded.

“They don’t get that. Sometimes it seems like they think they are punishing me. Sometimes grownups really aren’t all that smart, you know?”

“I’ve had occasion to notice that myself, no offence Marshal.”

“Marshal?” Abbot said stepping back two paces.

“He’s a pussy cat if you’re not a bad guy,” Johnny said, hoping to make the boy feel more comfortable.

“Gypsies and law men don’t mix – like oil and water. I better be on my way.”

“Nonsense,” Cal said. “We got the makin’s for a flapjacks and salt pork breakfast in our saddle bags. We’d be pleased to have you join us.”

“I’m a pretty good open fire cook,” Abbot said allowing the hint of a smile.

He clearly had a hard time trusting a law man and had it not been for Johnny’s presence he’d have run to hide.

“You two father and son?” the boy asked.

“Us?” Johnny said. “No. More like best friends, I think you’d say. Probably closer than most bests friends. It’s a long story. Hope we have time so I can tell it to you.”

Abbot nodded and broke his long stick over his knee.

“That some gypsy symbol of peace or something,” Johnny asked a bit puzzled.

“Heck no. It’s kindling. I’m starved. Let’s get a fire going.”

It was worth a good laugh all around.

The conversation went surprisingly well. Eventually Cal felt comfortable enough to ask a question that had been on his mind ever since seeing the boy close up.

“Most Gypsies I’ve known had darker skin – like well-tanned year-round. You are much fairer than that.”

“Is that a question, sir?”

“Not a very good one if you have to ask, I guess, but yes. I’m just the curious type. No offense intended, please understand.”

“None taken. I am what I am and I guess that has to be okay.”

“Me too,” Johnny said. “The, ‘I am what I am and that’s okay,’ thing, I mean.”

“I don’t understand,” Abbot said, “but some things take being better acquainted I suppose.”

“Won’t your parents be concerned when they find you are gone this morning?” Johnny asked.

Abbot’s face took on an immediately sad look but only for a moment.

“I got no parents. Everybody is my family. It may be hard for a outsider to understand.”

“You’re right there, but I’m not one to pry,” Johnny said. “If you want to explain sometime I’ll be eager to listen.”

“So, what’s your immediate plan, young man? After breakfast, I mean,” Cal asked.

“Go back to camp and get things loaded. We’re due up in Red Bend for shows next week.”

“Red Bend is our town,” Johnny said. “I hope we can see each other while you’re there. Do you help?”

“With the carnival booths – ring toss, ducks, sharpshooter. Nobody can win at any of them so stay away.”

“You mean they are rigged?”

“Let’s just say they are carefully designed to help the marks – I mean customers – fail. Thanks for the hand out, by the way, sir. You fellas are pretty good cooks.”

“It’s no hand out to invite a friend for a meal,” Cal said.

“Well, thanks. I better be getting back. They’ll be needing my help soon.”

“He offered his hand for shakes around, turned and walked off into the sunrise.”

“An interesting lad,” Cal said.

“A very sad lad, I’d say,” Johnny said. “Something’s not right about him. I’m going to find out what’s up.”

“Be careful. Those carnival folks have a code of life all their own. They don’t take kindly to interference.”

Ten minutes later they were back on the trail north. The welcome warmth of the early morning sun soon turned uncomfortably hot and Johnny shed his shirt.

“Can I ask you what you meant about that ‘you are what you are’ thing?” Cal asked. “Sounded like you were feeling like abnormal in some way. That a problem for you?”

“Don’t know if it’s a problem, but I am different from everybody in Red Bend. I’m trying to fit in, but I don’t want to give up who I was before I came out here – who I am deep down inside. I guess you’d say I feel the need to protect it.”

“Can you explain?”

“I was raised to like nice clothes, a nice house, eating with silverware, getting dressed up for school and the evening meal, taking my hat off inside, treating women and girls like they were special. Education was very important in my home and to me. Here it’s of minimal importance and mostly only to the mothers and not the kids or fathers. None of what I was, really fits out here. And the money thing – I always had more than the other kids. Now I also have more but I’ve decided to keep it a secret. I’m different, you see. Not bad or unpleasant or really sad about any of it. Just different. I’m doing my best to fit in without losing myself.”

“And you’re doing a good job at it. Everybody in town likes you, you know.”

“I know. I feel accepted, it’s just that the me that’s accepted is not the old me – maybe I’m thinking not the *real* me. It’s confusing sometimes.”

“You talked to Doc and Cilla about it?”

“Not really. They already got plenty on their plates.”

“Like it or not they do have *you* on their plates just like your Aunt Bea and me. We all want to help you. We know it must be really hard to adjust to having lost your family and to have been suddenly set down out here faced with such a foreign way of life. Sometimes grown-ups don’t know exactly what to do or say in situations like this. You may have to push

us – make some demands on us. Understand, son?”

“I do. I feel loved, if that’s what you’re trying to say, Mr. Tough Guy Law Man.”

He spread a smile in Cal’s direction.

Cal nodded and grew silent. He had said his say and the boy clearly understood. He wouldn’t pursue it further until Johnny brought it up. They both felt better after that chat – closer, more honest about things with each other.

“So, I understand Red Bend Days brings lots of problems to town,” Johnny said opening up a new topic with which he figured the Marshal would be comfortable.

“More than you can imagine. Keep your wallet – if you carry one – in your shirt pocket where you can keep an eye on it. Don’t believe most of the claims the Carnie folks offer. Never carry more money than you can afford to lose. Abbot was right when he said the games are all rigged against the players.”

Johnny listened and took it all in. It was a lot like when his father would give him a lecture to prepare him for some new experience. It felt right.

They parted ways at the lane to Aunt Bea’s place. Cal rode on into town. Johnny went home and filled his Aunt in on the things down in West Fork while enjoying a plate of still warm cinnamon biscuits at the kitchen table.

“You missed your bath last night,” she reminded him.”

“And I’m grimy from the ride. I’ll take a bar of soap down to the creek on the way into town. You coming into town today?”

“I’ll be there every day. Haven’t missed an event in forty years – probably more.”

“You going to enter the sharp shooter contest this year?”

“Oh, no. I gave that up a while back – need to give the younger generation their turn you understand. I’ll help the church ladies serve lunch. You come by there and get at least one good meal. I know the week’s all about candy, cakes, and lemonade but you still need to get one square in you every day.”

He nodded that he understood. He stowed his gear from the overnight ride and by ten o’clock had been in and out

of the creek, had donned clean cloths, had his hair slicked back, and was headed into town on foot. With all the extra people, there wouldn't be room at the livery and Johnny would not just let his horse stand out in the sun all day.

To his amazement, the Main Street had already been transformed into lines of carnival tents along both sides. He headed for the lemonade stand to offer his help. Clair was there. She brushed back his hair, which had fallen out of place while he was trotting along. He liked it when she touched him like that. He made a note to make sure his hair would always be messed up when he went to meet her.

Although he had kept his eye out for Abbot as he walked up Main Street he hadn't seen him. Later he'd make a more serious effort to locate him. The boy seemed to have a mysterious past and Johnny could not just pass up anything that smelled of a mystery.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Johnny helped at the lemonade stand until noon when the parade started. He ran up the stairs to Doc's place thinking the front windows there would be a good place from which to view the parade. Doc was always happy to see him. They arranged chairs so they could look down on the street.

Johnny had observed that all parades were basically the same event just played over and over again. There would be flags at the front, men and boys on horses, the local five or six-piece band, carriages carrying politicians and pretty women all dressed up in church going clothes, lots of kids marching along behind and always a few stray dogs weaving their ways in and out among the legs of the participants.

He mentioned those observations to Doc who came back with one word.

"Tradition."

"Like something done generation after generation."

"That's right. Traditions give folks a sense that there are some things about life that can always be counted on to continue along as they have always been. It provides a sense of security in and among all the changes that take place in life."

"So, parades are good things?"

"I'd say so. I can remember back to when I was one of those little kids chasing the dogs and hoping for a lump of brown sugar candy from one of the people riding in a carriage. Things stay the same even if the participants change."

Johnny nodded. Since he'd never been one of those little kids there in Red Bend he couldn't fully appreciate what

Doc had said, but he mostly understood the idea. Traditions maintain a sense of continuity from one generation to the next – a set of shared experiences that bind the young and old together.

After the parade – all ten minutes of it – Johnny was off to meet his aunt for lunch and then began a search for Abbot. He started up the row of booths on the north side of Main Street and then back east on the south side. Eventually he spied him tending to a marksmanship game. A penny for five shots with the chance to win a bag of candy for five consecutive bulls eyes.

“Hey, Abbot. Been looking all over for you.”

“Me, too. I mean I’ve been keeping an eye out for you. I’m pretty well stuck here ‘til two o’clock. Somebody else will take over then. That’s about a hour, I’d guess.”

Johnny nodded. I’ll stop back then, all right?”

“I’d like that. I gotta ask. *You want to test your skills young man?*”

It was delivered in the much louder, sing songy tone of the carnie barkers – not at all the tone of the Abbot Johnny had come to know.

“I guess. Here’s a penny.”

Johnny reached for a gun – a low power air rifle [a forerunner of the BB gun that would be invented by Clarence Hamilton in 1895 and sold by the Daisy Company.]

Abbot whispered to Johnny.

“Aim high to the right three inches.”

He had covered it by pretending to clear his throat and went back to hawking the game to others passing by.

Johnny lifted the gun and took aim, carefully moving it high right.

“Bulls eye to the young man with the city accent.”

Abbot reloaded the gun and returned it to Johnny.

“A second bulls eye. Gather ‘round folks and watch this young marksman split the center dot.”

After the fourth dead center shot Johnny noticed Abbot loaded and handed him a different gun. It again came with a message whispered through a cough – ‘left, low, one inch’.

Johnny understood the set up. The guns were rotated so the shooter could not get a good handle on how to aim

them. He suspected Abbot might be punished if he allowed five consecutive bulls eyes so he intentionally missed. Abbot looked puzzled. Johnny winked. Abbot's face cleared and he broke a smile, understanding what had just taken place. This was a smart kid he had met that day. It was a nice kid he had met that day.

"I'll be back at two," Johnny said as several men, drawn in by Johnny's near success, stepped forward to try their hands at the game.

He headed for the newspaper office.

"What you doing in here, Cilla? Don't you know there's a celebration going on out there?"

"I do but there's a paper to put together in here – that never changes - celebration or not. Which begs the question, what are *you* doing in here?"

"Like to look through the papers some more. Went down to West Fork with Cal last night to investigate a bank robbery that took place yesterday. It raised some questions for me."

"You may be in luck, then. The stage from Kansas City dropped off a half dozen new papers this morning. They're here on my desk. Haven't taken time to look through them yet. Be my guest."

Johnny picked them up and took them to the big chair in the corner keeping one eye out the window in case Clair just happened by. Several articles caught his eye. Three of the papers from communities that had reported bank robberies the week before, but which had not reported explosions in the previous editions, had articles describing such things in the new ones. That, Johnny figured, pretty well clinched the connection with the robberies.

In all, seven robberies were reported over the previous two months in eastern Kansas. Five of them were being visited by the Rodeo/Carnival run by the Cappi fellow. The other two were only a few miles away from those events. With the information in the latest editions of the papers, he learned that distant explosions had been paired with the robberies in all seven cases.

It made him wonder if the three men on horseback were working independently or if they were in cahoots with

Cappi. Johnny had the dynamite to tie the three strangers to the robberies, but nothing but coincidence to tie in the Carnival people. Like Cal had said, thieves could have just been tagging along after the Gypsies to take advantage of the money their mere presence generated in each town. If he couldn't find some connection, he'd have to proceed as if it were just the men who were involved.

It gave him another idea and raised several questions. All bills – money – were numbered, each with its very own serial number. He wondered if banks kept track of those numbers when the bills came into their possession. If they did, and if he could establish that the carnival money wagon carried a large number of those bills, then he had a connection to the Gypsies, also.

His first step was to speak with Mr. Yeager, the local bank president.

“Gotta be on my way, Cilla. Thanks for the look. Good stuff. I'll fill you in later. By the way, not much of interest in the new papers unless you're following the robberies. Later!”

He headed for the bank.

“Johnny. Always a pleasure to see you. What can I do for you?”

“May we speak in private, please?”

“Certainly. In my office.”

Johnny took a seat as Yeager closed the door, then sat down behind his big desk. Johnny asked his questions about the numbered bills.

“Yes. Every bill that comes in has its serial number recorded. Same for those we give out to our clients. It's a tight system – in and out. It is standard operating procedure for all banks in this territory. You have to understand we handle far more coins than bills and coins can't be traced that way.”

Johnny nodded that he understood and continued.

“This next part needs to remain just between the two of us for now, alright?”

“Certainly.”

“I'm suspecting some connection between the recent bank robberies and the carnival people. I'm wondering how I can find out if their money wagon holds lots of the bills from

the robberies.”

“Well, the most obvious way would be to see if their paymaster will trade, say your five-dollar bill for five of his ones.”

“That would be such a small sample. We need lots more, I think – more than a single person like me would reasonably have to trade in – like maybe getting a hundred one dollar bills back some way.”

“I see. Well, I can think of one way that might not raise any suspicion. I could go to the paymaster as the banker and make up some story about being drained of small bills. I could say I know there will be a run on them from the local venders to use for change since those people who have traveled here from some distance away will have condensed their money into as few larger bills as possible.”

“Good story. How do you usually get small bills like that?”

“Stage delivery from the mint in Colorado – once a month.”

“Have to make up a reason you failed to get enough ahead of time this month.”

“I can work on that. By the way, I assume the Marshal is in on all this.”

“Well, not entirely.”

“*Not entirely* sounds a whole lot like *not at all* to me, son. Tell you what. Get Cal on board with it and I’ll do my part. Wouldn’t feel safe walking across town with a hundred dollars on me either in large or small bills with all these strangers in town unless Cal or a deputy accompanied me.”

“I can understand that. Just getting all my ducks in a row before I approach the Marshal. He likes ‘for sure’ things and not ‘for maybe’ things. I’ll bring him around.”

It took him some time to track down Cal who seemed to be out and around twenty hours a day during the celebration week. He finally located him in front of the stage station. He explained his proposal and how the bank president had not only verified how bill numbers were used but his willingness to help with the plan.

“I’m busy ‘til three. See if Mr. Yeager can have things ready then. In the meantime, we need to get our hands on the

bill numbers from the other robberies. I'll need for you to send a few telegrams for me. Tell you what. You write out a telegram, I'll look it over at three and you can see that it gets sent out to the various sheriffs, Marshals and deputies where robberies occurred."

"I like the plan. I'll get right on it. See you at three at the bank – front door this time."

They exchanged a smile, thinking back to the exchange they had at the bank in West Branch. Johnny was off to meet Abbot, arriving at exactly two o'clock. A very large man with long straight black hair was in the booth with him.

"This is Garbo," Abbot said by way of introduction.

"Hi. I'm Johnny," he said extending his hand.

"Garbo doesn't shake," Abbot explained.

Johnny withdrew his hand, a dozen questions about it popping up in his head. He thought better than to ask.

Abbot vaulted over the front counter and urged Johnny on down the street in what seemed like a hurry as Garbo called after him to come back.

"Garbo don't like locals – as he calls you. I was afraid if he saw me going with you he might try to keep me with him. Pretend we don't hear him. Sorry if it seemed rude."

"Not a problem, and thanks for the explanation."

"So, what shall we do?" Johnny asked. "How much time do you have?"

"Can we get away from the Carnie? It's my whole life and I get sort of sick of it. I have the rest of the day if I can stay out of Garbo's sight."

"We can go to the creek. I have to be at the bank at three, but that shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. You fish?"

"Some. Not often, really. I like fish. Like I told you, I'm a pretty good open fire cook."

"Let's go catch some big ones then. We'll build a fire and you can cook our catch while I come back to town and do the bank thing."

"You sound very certain that I will catch my fill at the spot you're taking me to."

"I guarantee it, with plenty of time to go for a swim, too, if that sounds good."

Abbot nodded, but didn't commit himself. He seemed a strange mix of defiance and caution – disregarding a request from big, strong, mean looking Garbo and yet hesitant about something as safe as going for a swim.

It was good to leave the dusty street and noisy people behind for a while. It was a five-minute walk to the spot on the creek Johnny had in mind. It was enclosed by tall bluffs on each side and could only be accessed by climbing down the steep cliff from the rear. That's why it remained unoccupied while much of the creek bank was set up in camps.

"No poles," Johnny said removing a ball of fishing line from his rear pocket. "Have to line fish. You done that before?"

Abbot shook his head. Johnny was getting the idea the boy had really never had much experience fishing. That was all right. Johnny was a good teacher. He removed two hooks from his hat band and tied them onto the lines. Using his hat, he swept up a number of minnows from the shallow water at the edge of the creek.

"Bait," he explained. "The bass prefer small frogs, but will hit at minnows as well. Here, tie this small stick about three feet from the end of the line. It will act as a float and dangle the minnow at just the right depth for those hungry bass."

"You know a lot about . . . things out here."

It was the first-time Johnny had let himself recognize that he really had mastered a lot of the skills expected of frontier boys. He felt pleased.

They soon each had a line in the water. Almost immediately the float on Abbot's line began dancing along the surface of the water.

"You got a big one playing with you, Abbot. Begin pulling the line toward you real slow. In a few seconds the stick will sink out of sight. That's your signal to jerk the line really hard and set the hook in the fish's mouth."

Abbot worked the line patiently. The moment the fish began to run with it he jerked hard and felt the fish moving away with more strength than he expected.

"I got it, I think. Now what?"

"Pull it in all nice and steady. Let the fish help, let it

swim toward in toward the bank.”

Presently, it appeared in the shallows – over a foot long. Johnny helped remove it from the water and held it while Abbot struggled to remove the hook.

“You’re being too gentle. Cal says fish can’t feel the hook. Something about the tough skin in the mouth. Just jerk it out.”

He soon had the hook removed.

“Five pounds if an ounce,” Johnny said. “Won’t really need another one for the two of us.”

“Can I keep fishing anyway?”

“Sure. You can just throw back any more that you catch. Let me show you how to gut and fillet it.”

“Sounds disgusting,” Abbot said making a face.

Johnny remembered that had been the very response he had that first time at the beginning of the summer. He’d come a long way and not until seeing himself in his new friend did he realize that.

Johnny did the ‘disgusting’ part of the process and then showed Abbot how to use his knife to remove the bones and prepare it for the fire.

“We don’t have a skillet,” Abbot offered.

“Often don’t when fishing. Two methods we can use. Lay the fish out on a flat stone close to the fire or skewer it on a green stick and hold it over the flames. First method is slower but doesn’t require much attention. Second is faster but ties up your hands for the duration.”

Abbot opted for the skewer approach and managed both pieces by himself. Johnny sat back watching his new friend enjoying what was clearly a new experience for him. They had eaten their fill in plenty of time for Johnny to get to the bank. Abbot remained behind and continued fishing.

At the bank, it was just Mr. Yeager, the Marshal and Johnny.

“You have to remember,” Cal began, “that even if we find a bill or two from a robbery in among those from the pay master it won’t prove a thing. Those five robberies put over six thousand stolen dollars into circulation somewhere – very likely some of it here in central Kansas.”

“I understand that,” Johnny said. “It might be more

incriminating if none of the stolen bills show up.”

“Why do you say that?” the Marshal asked.

“Well, if they know about banking procedures and if they know what’s good for them here among the brilliant young detectives of eastern Kansas, they would be smart to keep all that money out of sight ‘til they move on out of the state.”

“I certainly had not put it together that way. You ready, Mr. Yeager?”

“I’m nervous about it, but I guess I am ready. Yes.”

The pay master’s wagon was at the far eastern end of town. The bank was in the middle of Main Street. It was a five-block walk, which, for Johnny seemed to take forever but for Mr. Yeager seemed to go by far too fast.

He approached the window at the front of the big wagon and introduced himself. The paymaster, seeing the badge on Cal looked his way as if asking him to verify the man really was the banker. Cal stepped forward.

“I’d like you to meet, Mr. Yeager, the president of the Red Bend State Bank. Been here for twenty years and never had a problem for its depositors.”

The big man at the window nodded.

“Let’s see your money,” he said before making any move toward the smaller bills.

Mr. Yeager placed his case on the small counter at the window, opened it and withdrew twenty, ten dollar bills, more than Johnny thought they had agreed on. He counted it to the man behind the bars in the window and slipped it through them. The man recounted them smelling each one for some unexplained reason. He nodded and grunted.

The money was stacked over to the side as he reached below the window and produced a small, heavy cloth, bag. He untied the drawstring and reached inside counting out two hundred one dollar bills in ten stacks of twenty. He slipped them through the bars one stack at a time. Mr. Yeager recounted each and placed it in the case he carried. Soon, the exchange had been completed.

Both he and the Marshal thanked the pay master and just that soon they were headed back to the bank. Johnny stopped at the telegraph office to collect the wires for the

Marshal. He caught up with the others in the president's office.

On his way, Johnny had sorted through the telegrams. There were only three responses up to that point so many of the serial numbers had not arrived.

"Longest telegrams I've ever seen," Johnny said. "One is five pages. Must have cost somebody a pretty penny."

"How shall we proceed?" Mr. Yeager asked.

"I've been thinking about that," Johnny said. "Why not first, sort the bills you just got into numerical order. Then as we read off a number from a telegram it will be easy to sort through them and see if it's there."

The men nodded and Mr. Yeager began the process of putting the bills in order. He was fast, probably due to his many years of handling money, Johnny figured. Then the attempt to match them up began.

"Johnny, you read the numbers from the telegrams," Cal said. "Mr. Yeager, you pull out any bills that match and I will keep them in a stack here at the side of your desk."

Johnny and Cal moved chairs into positions which would make their tasks easy to perform. Johnny called out the first number. Mr. Yeager thumbed through one of the several piles of bills he had made.

"First try a success," he announced with surprise in his tone, slipping the bill from the pile and handing it to the Marshal.

Johnny called out the second, sounding much like the caller at the Friday Bingo game at the church.

"And the second is a success," Mr. Yeager announced. The surprise in his voice changed to excitement.

The bill was moved to the new pile. In the end, of the two hundred one dollar bill they had just acquired from the pay master, one hundred and eighty-two bore numbers from the telegrams – recently stolen bills.

Cal stood up. "We need to make a list of the bill numbers in this stack and I'll witness it. Then we need to keep them together in the vault for evidence. Can you function without that hundred and eighty some dollars for a while, Mr. Yeager?"

"Yes, we can. In reality I will receive a delivery by

stage in the morning – contrary to my little fib to the pay master. We have plenty of coins to cover whatever change the local venders may need.”

With that completed, Johnny and Cal moved out onto the wooden sidewalk in front of the bank. The street was packed with people each one seeming to want to move to a spot already occupied by somebody else. It made for a lot of pushing and shoving – mostly good natured.

“What’s next?” Johnny asked.

“I’ll have to speak with the judge and see what he suggests. I still don’t think we have court room solid evidence. We need some better connection to the actual act of committing the robberies.”

“Not sure I understand. They have the money.”

The Marshal took a small arrowhead from his pocket and slipped it into Johnny’s shirt pocket.

“Let’s say I had stolen that arrow head. A deputy finds it on you. Does that prove you stole it?”

“I see what you mean. I guess we have some thinking to do yet. I better get back out to the creek before Abbot wears out all the bass in my fishing hole – catching them, throwing them back, catching them – well, you get the idea.”

“Quite the fisherman, is he?”

“Quite the first time ever fisherman if you ask me, but he seems to really like it. I’ll check back later.”

Johnny took off on a trot toward the creek.

He made his way down the cliff and walked out toward the water as he pulled his shirt off over his head. Abbot was nowhere to be seen. His line was in the water with the other end tied around a rock on the bank. Something seemed *very* wrong.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The stick, acting as the float or bobber, suddenly sank below the surface and stayed there. A rush of bubbles rose to the surface. Johnny became concerned. He didn't understand what was going on. It would have taken a five-hundred-pound mud turtle to blow off that much air all at once.

He leaned down and picked up a good-sized rock – dumb, perhaps, but the only protection he could think of at that moment.

Suddenly the water in front of him splashed up three feet high and there in the middle of it all was . . . Abbot – smiling, laughing, giggling Abbot.

“Did I scare you?” he asked as he sloshed his way toward the bank.

“You did that. My heart still hasn't started beating.”

There was more laughter – from both of them that time.

They swam and played in the water for the next hour or so as they each shared a few facts about themselves.

As it turned out, when Johnny was five, he and his father were making their way across a large open space on horseback through a severe thunder storm when his father had been hit by a bolt of lightning and killed. After a day or so all alone wandering the prairie, the Gypsies came by and took him in. He had been with them ever since – almost nine years. He couldn't remember where that took place and no one in the carnival group would speak about it with him. It accounted for his light-colored skin and why he had no parents.

“They have taken fine care of me. I've never had to go

hungry. When I'm ill they treat me. As long as I behave myself they are kind and gentle with me. I have my jobs to do and I do them. Each of us plays an important part in our group – our family as it is referred to.”

“Don't you wonder about your mother?”

“All the time, but it's not a topic I dare speak of.”

“Do you know anything about your past at all?”

“Not much. I remember a brand on the horses.”

He took a stick and drew it in the red clay on the bank.

“B bar K (B – K),” Johnny said reading it. “I'm sure I can track that down for you if you want me to. May not get you anywhere. Horses are often sold after they are branded.”

“I have a spot here on my hip.”

He pointed to a place a few inches below his tan line. A reddish blotch about the size of a penny.

“That's a birth mark,” Johnny said. “I've seen them before on people. Lucky it's down there out of sight most of the time. I'm sure your mother would recognize it if you were to ever find her.”

“That's what I've thought. I don't know how to use it to help find her though. Can't go around every new town we enter with my pants dragging the ground hoping we'll meet and she'll see it.”

It painted a humorous picture and Johnny chuckled.

Abbot broke a little smile, recognizing the absurdity in what he'd said.

No more was said about it, but Johnny had stumbled upon another mystery, and when Johnny stumbled upon a mystery one could be certain he would do what he could to solve it.

“You're really thin. You sick or anything?” Johnny asked.

“I don't think so. Probably just come from skinny parents.”

“When was the last time you've seen a doctor?”

“A doctor. A real doctor? Never as far as I know. Why?”

“One of my three best grown up friends is a doctor. Maybe we should let him take a look at you, just to make sure you're alright.”

“My family wouldn’t approve of that. We . . . they . . . don’t trust doctors.”

“So, is it *we* or *they*?”

Abbot looked puzzled.

“If it’s ‘we’ then that means you don’t trust them either. If it’s ‘they’ then I see some hope of getting you into the sawbones for a quick look/see.”

“Sawbones? Look/see? You’re speaking words I don’t know.”

“Sawbones is local speak for doctor. Look/see just means examine.”

“I guess it’s really ‘they’ then. But it would have to be a clandestine meeting for this look/see from your sawbones friend.”

“Clandestine – private, out of view, concealed – a good word. Are such big words common among Gypsies?”

“No. Not at all, in fact, but I read a lot. Like I said, I have very few friends. Garbo sees to it that I have books to read. He has always been my protector. In bad weather, I stay with him and his wife in their wagon.”

“He seemed gruff and looked mean – no offense intended,” Johnny said.

“He is both of those, but inside he has a good heart where I am concerned. He’s never been mean to me. He often lit up my behind for misbehaving when I was younger, but only to keep me on the right path in life. I can see that now. I’ll never hit my own kids, but I understand what he was trying to do.”

Johnny was impressed with the wisdom Abbot was expressing. The Gypsy way of life seemed complicated, but then to an outsider, life there in Red Bend seemed complicated, also. Johnny fully understood that!

The sun was three quarters of the way across the sky indicating five o’clock. The boys dressed, doused the fire, and climbed their way out of the campsite to the meadow that bordered Red Bend to the south.

“If we circle to the north we can get to Doc’s place without being seen,” Johnny said.

“We’re really going to do that, I guess.”

“Only if you agree. I’m not into forcing my beliefs on

others, but I sure think it only makes sense not to pass up a once in fourteen-years opportunity.”

“I’ll go along with it. Will it hurt?”

“Doc is very gentle. He cut a bullet out of me a few months back and was very gentle the way I’ve been told about it. You can trust him to do what’s right.”

“I noticed the scar on your chest. I guess we both have our special marks, don’t we?”

“I guess we do. I like the word special.”

Before long they were up the steps and inside Doc’s office.

“Doc. This is my new friend Abbot. He’s with the Carnival. Never been to see a doctor before. I figured it was time. You take a look at him will you?”

“Good to meet you, Abbot.”

Doc offered his hand for an extended shake.

“It is customary to obtain a parent’s permission in cases like this,” Doc said.

“He has no parents and I’m sure there is no legal document assigning custody or any such thing,” Johnny said, supplying what he figured was the essential information to move on with things.

“This alright with you, then, son?”

“Johnny has great faith in you. I’ve never found his advice to be wrong. You may proceed.”

“You don’t speak like any Gypsy I’ve ever encountered – no offense to the Gypsies, you understand.”

“I understand and you are probably right.”

“Abbot reads a lot.”

Clearly, Johnny wanted Doc to get on with things.

Twenty minutes later Doc pronounce Abbot ‘Fit as a Fiddle’.

“That means he finds you be in good health,” Johnny explained, remembering the difficulty his friend was having with the local idioms (expressions).

“That one I know. In fact, I believe the saying had its origin among my people – the Gypsies. I’ve heard the story many times. What do I owe you, doctor?”

“No charge for first time visits.”

“I’m not sure I believe you, but thank you. I have been

given to believe you are kind and generous.”

The boys were soon out the door and down the steps to the street. Johnny wasn't ready to share his suspicions about the carnival folks with his new friend, but did want to find out more about the Cappi man who owned the shows. They made their way east on the board sidewalk having no particular destination in mind.

“So, who's in charge of the Carnival, anyway,” Johnny asked pretending dumb.

“Cappi. He owns three large businesses, the carnival, the rodeo and the construction company.”

Johnny knew about the first two, but not the third.

“What sort of construction company?”

“I don't know a lot about it. It mostly goes into place that have been damaged by storms or floods or fires and puts them back in order – fixes them up like new. They are quite good according to what I've heard. I've never actually seen any of their work. I think I'd like doing that better than the carnie – seems more honest and useful if you know what I mean.”

Johnny nodded.

“You ever consider becoming a rodeo star,” he asked.

“Thought about it – in my fantasies – but I really don't like big animals. I haven't had much chance to really study the rodeo fellow's skills since I'm always working booths at the carnival. I ride very well – it's a skill that's treasured by the Gypsies. We have competitions among our own. I do pretty well for my age.”

“Are you going to enter the big race on Saturday?” Johnny asked. “A new saddle's the main prize. Made right here in Red Bend. I'm entered.”

“You have your own horse?”

“Yes. Diab – Diablo's his full-blown moniker.”

“Moniker is like name I take it.”

“Right. I shorten it when it's just him and me talking.”

Abbot smiled as if the idea of such a relationship with a horse was humorous – maybe even odd.

“And which name does the horse prefer – Diab or Diablo?”

“You're pulling my leg, I can tell. I believe he likes Diab

best if there was any serious side to your question.”

“There wasn’t, but it’s good to know, I suppose – if I should try and steal him some night. You know us Gypsies – known to be thieves through and through.”

Abbot smiled again, indicating it had also been intended as humorous. Johnny wasn’t so sure. The Gypsy’s reputation was at best suspect if not downright unsavory (bad, disgusting). He really hoped Abbot turned out to disprove what he thought he knew about them.

So, about the race?” Johnny asked for clarification.

“I hadn’t known about it until you mentioned it. I can see if Garbo approves and will let me use one of his horses. Montague is pretty fast and she and I ride well together.”

They were approaching the newspaper office.

“I want you to meet Cilla – short for Pricilla – the editor and owner of the local newspaper.”

Three doors later he ushered his new friend inside.

“Cilla. I want you to meet my new friend, Abbot. He’s with the carnival and will be moving on soon so we’re making the most of the short time we have together.”

Abbot met her extended hand with his and they shook.

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am. Johnny has spoken well about you. I expected you to be much older.”

“Well, aren’t you the young charmer? Let’s just say I wear my years pretty well. You what, fifteen?”

“Fourteen, I’m guessing,” he answered.

Cilla looked puzzled and turned toward Johnny for some sort of clarification.

“Abbot and I are both orphans, only he doesn’t know who his parents were, where he is from, or – it seems – when his birthday was/is.”

Johnny turned directly to Abbot.

“I wasn’t aware you didn’t have that information, but I understand how you wouldn’t know that. Do you celebrate a birthday?”

“When I was ten Garbo told me to just choose a date so I chose July 4th. That way wherever I am there is always a beg celebration going on with fireworks and parades and such.”

“Pretty nice,” Cilla said. “Most of us are just stuck with

the day we were born. Mine is October fifth. Can you think of a plainer, drabber, less exciting day than that?"

Abbot smiled.

"I'd be honored to share mine with you. The celebration is always plenty big enough for one more."

They enjoyed the joke together with nods, smiles and chuckles all around.

Cilla turned to Johnny.

"Anything new on the robberies?"

Johnny had hoped that topic would not come up. He tried to figure a way to move on in a hurry so as to not either alert Abbot to his interest or present any indication he was getting close to a solution in case the Gypsies were actually in on it.

"I guess I sort of forgot about it – the big Red Bend Day celebration and all."

Cilla's immediate response had been a furrowed brow indicating she didn't understand. That immediately smoothed as she came to see what he was up to. She went on as if it really held no interest to her either.

"You have a home base – home town, Abbot?" she asked.

"Not really, if you're referring to my Gypsy family. I've always assumed my own home town was somewhere close to the B bar K ranch, but I have no idea where that is."

Johnny filled her in on Abbot's early history. Cilla pulled a thick book from a shelf. She blew what appeared to be years of dust off the front cover.

"This book is a record of all the registered ranch brands in a ten-state area – south to Texas and north to North Dakota. Let's see if we can find anything about a B bar K."

They were arranged alphabetically. In the end, there were six ranches using that brand – one in each of six states. Within each state the use of a brand was limited to one ranch although in some cases several ranches had been using the same brand before the 'one per state' thing had been enacted and nobody was forced to change.

"I thought that seemed familiar," she said, pointing at the top right of a page. The Billy Kendal ranch about 150 miles south west of here. A small ranch purchased by the

Circle D about ten years ago. Not much other information available.”

“That’s what, a four-day ride on a good horse?” Johnny asked.

“Four long days on a very well-conditioned horse. I see the Circle D has its own telegraph post. It’s only twenty miles or so from Great Bend, which is right on the railroad.”

“Got anything else about that area?” Johnny asked.

“Give me a while and I’ll see what I can dig up here. There may be something in the back room.”

“Johnny has lots of kind and helpful friends,” Abbot said. “Thank you, you know.”

Cilla nodded, not thinking more words were necessary (and that from a woman who made her living using words!).

The boys left and Johnny guided them back to the lemonade stand where he introduced Abbot around, saving Clare for last.

“This is Clare. An eighth grader, but quite mature for her age.”

The others snickered wondering who he was really trying to impress – his new friend or the girl he liked to walk along the creek with his arm around her waist. *Both*, was Abbot’s take on it. He shared a wink with one of the other boys. Johnny was toooooo involved with Clare to notice.

After a short time, the boys left going their separate ways – Abbot saying he needed to give Garbo a supper break and Johnny wanting to present a few more questions to Cilla. They agreed to meet up the next day.

“Glad you came back alone,” she said as Johnny entered the office. “I have several ideas related to your new friend, but I wanted to run them by you first.”

Johnny hopped up on the long table where Cilla was seated and made himself comfortable. He waited for her to continue.

“First, do you think Abbot really wants to try and find his mother?”

“It’s hard to say. He seems to be torn. Says he thinks about her often. All he really knows is his life with the Gypsies so the idea of getting back with her is probably pretty scary. My take on it is that he remembers almost nothing of his years

with his parents. He doesn't even know if he had any brothers or sisters. He doesn't remember his parents name or his. 'Abbot' was apparently just given to him by the Gypsies.

"Traumatic events such as he went through often cause memory loss. Ask Doc. He'll know more about that. Well, back to my question. I can telegraph the newspaper editor in Great Bend – we often trade stories of state-wide interest. He's been there for twenty years so I just imagine he would know about any such story – the man being struck by lightning and his son going missing. If he does, finding the mother should be relatively simple if she's still in the area."

"Can you ask him, but also ask him to keep the inquiry private – not let it out to the mother if it turns out there is a mother. I think that part should be up to Abbot."

"I agree and yes I'm certain I can trust Russell to handle it in that way."

"Let's do that much then, make the inquiry. Just provide the minimum information needed so Gus at the telegraph doesn't go off halfcocked and blab it around. He's known to do that."

"I know he has a hard time keeping secrets," Cilla said nodding. "Why don't you write out a telegram, I'll look it over and make suggestions and we'll have it sent."

"I can do that. Pencil and paper?"

Five minutes later after much scratching out and several additions he handed the sheet to Cilla. She read it out loud.

"Russell: A matter in strict confidence. Do you know about a child losing a father to lightning nine years ago, and being missing to this day? – Cilla"

Cilla made a few minor changes and Johnny was off to the telegraph office. He expected a rapid response since it was an editor to editor communication. He watched Gus send it at five o'clock. He would check back first thing the next morning.

He checked in at the church to see if his aunt was still there. She had left soon after lunch so he set his legs on trot and headed home. It had been a long day on minimal sleep the night before. He was in bed early hoping to be rested and ready for another good day on Tuesday.

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CHAPTER SIX

The following morning – Tuesday – Johnny entered the telegraph office at six thirty. Gus was asleep on the cot where he spent nights.

“You need a bell or something, Gus.”

“Seems to me your jabbering serves the same purpose, son.”

He sat up on the edge of the bed, stretched and stood, moving to the counter.

“I suppose you’re here for the response from the Russell guy in Garden City.”

“I suppose you are right. Did it come in yet?”

“Nothing yet. Want me to resend it?”

“You charge for that – resending a telegram?”

“Of course, I do. Them wires don’t pay for themselves.”

It was an odd phrase but Johnny figured he understood – all businesses had expenses and the telegraph company had its system of wires to maintain. A telegram was a very expensive way to communicate – two or three dollars for a ten-word message. (By comparison, a letter cost three cents in those days.)

“I’ll wait ‘til noon. Then I’ll ask Cilla what she wants to do.”

Johnny left to help get the lemonade stand ready for the day. Clare wasn’t there yet so he did what was needed and trotted on to Doc’s place. Doc was an early riser and if he scheduled his arrival right, he’d be invited to join the old gentleman for breakfast at the local restaurant. It would still be nearly empty. The visitors stayed up late for the rodeo and

didn't hit the street 'til after eight.

His timing had been perfect and they were soon sitting across from each other at a small table at the rear of the big room.

"I got a question about memory loss after a traumatic event like Abbot had when his father was killed."

Doc remained silent. Johnny's brow furrowed. Doc responded.

"I haven't yet heard a question."

"I guess I thought it was implied. Tell me everything related to that topic."

Doc chuckled but began.

"*What* happens is known. *Why* it happens is really not understood. Emotionally intense experiences have been known to shut down a person's memory for things immediately related to it. Why are you asking?"

Johnny related Abbot's problem.

"I see. Well, that may be partly what's called traumatic memory loss but mostly, I imagine, just the fact that kids that age often forget things about their earlier life when it isn't reviewed frequently."

Johnny frowned signaling he needed more information.

"Usually a little kid's life is filled with things that keep memories alive – repetition of those same things over and over again – seeing the important people in life, the house in which he lives, the activities that regularly take place – things like that. Without that repetition, young brains just seem to let memories fade away. They begin sticking for the long term better sometime after age seven or so."

"So, the fact Abbot can't remember his name or his mom or where he lived isn't really so unusual for a four or five-year-old."

"That's right. It would be unusual if he *were* to remember, in fact."

"Will those things ever come back – I mean like if he was to be reunited with his mom?"

"Maybe. Hard to say."

"Too bad. I have lots of good memories of being with my family when I was a little boy – birthdays, Christmas, riding with dad. I'm sure glad my brain decided to keep them."

Memories are all I have of them.”

Doc cleared his throat and brushed a tear away from the corner of his eye.

“Cilla has a contact she thinks may be able to help find Abbot’s mom – if he decides he wants to go through with it,” Johnny went on, apparently unaware of doc’s reaction.

“Let me know if I can help in any way,” Doc said.

The Marshal entered and walked directly to their table. He removed his hat and took a seat.

“Morning.”

He nodded at Doc, but was clearly there to speak with Johnny.

“The rest of the telegrams about the currency numbers came in. Identical results to the first ones. I wanted you to know that, but mostly I want to caution you about doing anything stupid and putting yourself in danger over this. I’ll do the investigating, you understand?”

“Why Marshal. You make it sound like I’m some sort of reckless scatterbrained teen ager who just might act before he thought things through.”

“Exactly! You get my message?”

“I did and I appreciate your concern. I assure you that I will act with due caution and aplomb (be cool).”

The Marshal tossed a steely glance at him. It’s message was something like, ‘I know you’re just going to wade right in until you’re way over your head in this one and there’s nothing – short of locking you away – that I can do about it’.

The big man stood and left.

“The Marshal seems quite concerned for your safety. I hope you will heed his warning.”

A moment of silence followed and then they both broke into laughter suggesting there was no way either of them would keep their noses out of the biggest mystery the little town had seen in a decade. They spent the next fifteen minutes talking about possible steps they might be able to take.

After breakfast Doc returned to his office. There would soon be a line of strangers lined up for him to treat – broken bones from the rodeo riders, bruises from bar fights the night

before, dysentery from the water unfamiliar to their systems, and the usual rash of baby's ear aches, fevers and croup (coughing and trouble breathing).

Earlier in the month, Johnny had ordered a new set of reins for Diablo – something special for the big race. He stopped at the leather shop to check on their progress.

“Hey, Johnny!” Nicholas, the proprietor, said clearly happy to see the boy. Those reins are still a day away. I bleached them last night. They will be ready to take the dye later today. How did you get the idea for bright red reins in the first place?”

“Saw them in a picture on the cover of a book about Bad Bart – the fictional outlaw turned sheriff down in Texas. Wanted them ever since.”

“Sorry they've taken me so long, but I got a rush order for three, large, all leather, valises (suitcases) that I have to have ready for pick-up early Sunday morning. Don't usually do Sunday business, you understand, but that was the only time the buyer could come by.”

“Just so I have them in time for the big race on Saturday morning.”

“They'll be ready. Tomorrow afternoon, then, young man.”

As Johnny turned to leave he noticed something about the room. The walls on the back, front and the west end were covered in planks running back and forth (horizontal). The wall on the east end had the planks running up and down (vertical). They also were clearly much newer. He asked about the apparent inconsistency.

“Had a fire in here last winter. Ruined that whole east wall. Had to have it rebuilt. The men did good work, but had a mind of their own when it came to design. They said the new fad in the cities was horizontal on three walls and vertical on the other one. I figured I'd go along with it if it would give the shop a modern look.”

“What caused the fire?”

“Not sure. The stove is there in the middle of the back wall so it couldn't have been the cause. Looked like it started at the floor and spread right up to the ceiling. If it hadn't been for a stranger passing by on horseback that night, the whole

place – maybe the whole block would have gone up in flame the way all the buildings butt right up against each other.”

Johnny nodded – his way of thanking him for the fully nonessential information. He left to find Abbot and arrange a time to meet up. As he passed the telegraph office he stuck his head inside. Gus understood.

“Just came in – from the Russell fella. Hope it’s good news. Sounds like it to me.”

Johnny went on inside and accepted the sheet from the old man. Telegrams were printed on half sheets of yellow paper. The message was hand printed in all upper-case letters. It had been found there was less chance for errors using that format.

Johnny took a moment to read it to himself. ‘YES. BOY FIVE. NINE YEARS AGO. MOTHER JANE WITHROW. BOY JAMES. ADVISE. RUSSELL’

With the paper in hand, Johnny ran full speed across the street to the newspaper office. He entered talking.

“Got the telegram from Russell. He knows about the situation and included some names.”

He dropped the sheet on the desk in front of her. She took a moment to read it for herself.

“I guess that moves things one step closer if Abbot – James – wants to pursue it. How are you going to proceed?”

“Not sure. Have any suggestions. I tend to just barge in and say my say. I’m thinking that might be too much of a shock. What do you think?”

“You’re probably right, but I don’t know any subtle way of delivering the information. Maybe begin with the fact you have received information about his past and tell him when he’s ready you’ll share it with him.”

“You’re the greatest! That’s really good. Like Abbot said, I’m so lucky to have four amazing grown-ups in my life.”

Cilla shrugged. Johnny went on.

“The Marshal got the rest of the numbers back on the bills from the robberies. Lots of what we got from the pay master match them. Not sure what his plan is.”

“My suggestion – and I know you haven’t asked for it – is for you to let him handle it.”

“He been in here this morning?”

“Yes, actually he has.”

“I figured. Telling you lecture me. I’ll tell him you did if he asks. See you later. I’ll keep you posted on the Abbot thing.”

That morning Abbot was rolling back the canvas tarps from the front of the ring toss booth. There was a row of wooden, oval targets across the back of the booth. For a penny, you got four rings – looked to be six-inch crochet rings. The idea was to toss the rings and make them stay on top of the rounded targets. They tended to fall off like water drops off waxed paper. Any two out of the four tries and you would win a prize.

“Hey. Abbot. Morning!”

“Good morning. I’m here ‘til noon then free ‘til five again.”

“I’ll stop by at noon. My aunt said she’d treat us both to lunch at the church if you were free. Ham and scalloped potatoes today. One of my favorites.”

“Sounds fine. I’ll look forward to it.”

Johnny turned and left, heading home. He hadn’t run Diablo full out in several days and knew if he was going to be ready for the race he needed work. They ran the open meadow east of his Aunt’s place. It was within easy reach of the creek for frequent short drinks. With nobody around to watch, Johnny felt free to give Diablo his head and let him run with the wind.

After an hour, they headed back to the stable. Johnny walked him to cool him down gradually, and brushed the thistles and ticks from his legs and belly.

“I’m not taking you to town because it’s crowded with folks and horses and I’d have to leave you outside. You’re better off here grazing the meadow and chasing ground squirrels,” he explained to Diablo knowing if anybody had overheard him they’d have labeled him tetch in the head (crazy).

On the way back to town, he stopped at the rodeo grounds and watched some of the riders practicing. He approached a man who was doing rope tricks hoping to strike up a conversation.

“Pretty handy with that rope, Sir. Must have taken

years of practice to get that good.”

“Every day for the past three years. Want to see a new one I’m working on?”

“Sure. What’s it about?”

“A lariat working in each hand – both up over my head – one moves down around my body circling my knees and then the other down around my chest. Then, both back up over my head again.”

“Sounds very complicated. May I see you do it?”

“If you promise not to spread it around when I fail to complete it. Don’t need no bad publicity.”

“Give you my word.”

While the man worked on the new trick Johnny kept talking.

“Where’s the rodeo headed next?”

“Abilene’s next then Salina and McPherson. A few little places in between. Hate those one nighters.”

“One nighters?” Johnny asked

“Arrive in the morning. Set up by noon. Do a afternoon show and a evening show, tear everything down and leave overnight for the next town. Way too much effort for way too little income.”

“You get paid by the show?”

“We get paid by the week – one show or twenty. It’s the same amount.”

“Cappi’s the boss man, I hear.”

“Slave driver’s more like it. I shouldn’t have said that. Don’t repeat it, alright?”

“Never be heard from me. You like doing what you do?”

“I was hired to work the construction crew, but one day Cappi seen me with my rope and here I am instead.”

“The construction crew must travel separately. Haven’t seen any building around here.”

“That’s how it is. We never catch up to them.”

“Catch up?”

“They work the same circuit – just several months ahead of us. They book us into the places they visit. I guess they serve double duty, you could say. Like they scout out places for us to perform while they do their building.”

It made little sense to Johnny, but he didn't follow up on it. It did make him wonder if they had been the ones who had worked on the leather shop after the fire. He let it go and moved on. The rope man never did get the new trick right.

At noon Johnny met Abbot and they enjoyed lunch together. For a skinny kid, he sure could eat a lot, Johnny thought. He wondered if the Gypsies really were feeding him well enough. They chatted a short time with Bea and then made their way outside.

"Can we go back to the fishing spot," he asked as they left the church? "It's a great place to get away from . . . well, from most everything."

"Sure. You're not still hungry, are you?"

"Goodness no. They just kept bringing more food by our table and I felt like I had to accept it so I didn't offend them. I may not eat again for a week."

At the creek, they sat back in the shade against a long-fallen tree trunk. Johnny began the conversation he'd been thinking about.

"Cilla heard from her editor friend down in Garden City."

"What did he have to say? Did he know anything?"

"He sort of knew something."

"I don't understand. People either know something or they don't."

"You're right. I just didn't want to go too fast for you."

"You think I'm dumb?"

"No. I didn't mean that. You're anything but dumb. Alright. Here's what he said. You sure you're ready?"

"I've been ready for ten years."

He certainly seemed eager to hear what Johnny had to tell him.

"Russell says he knows of a situation like yours."

"There is more than that, I hope."

"Nine years ago, a man on horseback was killed by lightning. His young son was with him. They son is still missing."

"The mother? Anything about the mother?"

"Yes. You sure you want to hear?"

"Go!"

"According to Russell her name is Withrow – Jane

Withrow. Her son's name was James. Apparently, she is still in the area of Garden City although I really don't know that for sure. Telegrams don't have room for many details."

"James doesn't seem to mean anything to me," Abbot said, clearly disappointed.

"How about Jimmy. A little kid would probably be called Jimmy like I'm Johnny, not John or Jonathon."

"Jimmy. Yes. That feels familiar. Jimmy. Jimmy. That could be right, but I really can't say for sure."

"What do you want to do next?"

"Find out for sure, of course. This is my life we're talking about."

"Alright. Let's look at the possibilities and make a plan."

"Sounds good. What do you have in mind – you always seem to have something in mind."

"A follow up telegram seems in order – to make sure the mother is still there."

"And that she wants to reconnect with her son," Abbot added immediately.

"Yes. That, too. Then, see if a meeting seems to be in order. The train runs from just south of here to Garden City. You could go and meet her."

"I don't have money for such a trip, but I can probably find enough for the telegram you talked about."

"I can find money for the telegram and the trip if you want to take it."

"Really. That will be expensive."

"Just believe me. There is money available for the trip. I'd rather you didn't push me for any more information about it. We need to go over the plan with Cilla or Doc first. They always have good suggestions."

"Let's get back to town and do it, then," Abbot said.

Before long they were bounding up Doc's steps. Johnny laid out all they knew. Doc agreed a second telegram was in order before Abbot got his hopes any higher and the first item would be to ask the woman if the child had any birthmarks. It seemed to him that would be the clincher. The second item was to make sure she was in a position to reunite with the boy. Maybe she had another family and would have reservations about having Abbot – James – come back. He

doubted that, but it needed to be a consideration.

“And Abbot,” he said directly to the young man, “you have to think about your present family. Will you be willing to leave them to get back together with a person you don’t even know? What if she was a terrible mother? How will this Garbo fellow feel if you decide to just pull up stakes and leave him? Maybe you’ll decide to live back and forth between the two – would the Gypsies even allow such a thing? I understand they are a very tight group.”

“Looks like there are lots of decisions in my near future,” Abbot said. “Thanks for your straight forward approach with me. I needed to hear the worst possible outcomes.”

“You’ll find Doc is nothing if not straight forward,” Johnny said. “I’m trying to be like him in that way. I am finding that girls don’t always appreciate that approach, but I have my Aunt Bea and Cilla for girl advice.”

“I find girls like me better than boys,” Abbot said, “but if I’m really not a family member, I doubt if I will ever be allowed to marry a Gypsy girl. I’ve worried about that a lot this past year. It only recently came up in my thinking. The growing up thing I imagine.”

“Let’s get a telegram put together for Russell. Cilla can help with that.”

They thanked Doc for his help and a minute later were back at the newspaper office where a telegram was soon composed and approved. Five minutes later it was sent. The boys stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the telegraph office.

“How long will it take for a reply do you think?” Abbot asked.

“Doubt if we’ll hear before tomorrow. The woman may live many miles from Garden City. Russell may not even know exactly where she is so it may take time to locate her and then get word to her. Lots of ifs on that end: If he knows where she is, if he can get to her quickly, if she’s of a mind to – well, you know – think about having you in her life again.”

“I get all that. It’s odd. This morning I didn’t even have anyway to begin looking for her and now we have this lead and I’m already growing very impatient about things.”

“Can you meet me here first thing in the morning?” Johnny said. “Say about six. That will have given Russell fifteen hours. It’s the earliest I figure there’s any chance of a reply.”

“Sure. Six. Thanks for all your help. Regular folks don’t often just volunteer to assist us Gypsies. It is a very odd feeling. Garbo will tell me you’re out to get something from me. He won’t want me to trust you.”

“Well, he’s right, of course,” Johnny began. “I am out to get something from you.”

Abbot frowned and posed a question with his face.

“Right from the first time I saw you against the sunrise I’ve been out to get . . . your friendship.”

They exchanged a smile.

“It’s good that’s all you want. I really don’t have anything else for you. These clothes and a few books. That’s all I have.”

“Let’s hope by this time tomorrow there may be more than that.”

The thought brightened Abbot’s face. It did the same for Johnny. In some ways, Johnny felt a little jealous. He knew there was no way he could ever reconnect with his family and here Abbot just might be on the verge of doing that very thing. He was happy for his friend. He was a bit sad for himself. He’d deal with it. That was mostly what his life had been about those past several months – dealing with his loss and trying to build something new – something new and good.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

It was still early – not yet five o'clock. Johnny hadn't seen hide nor hair of the three men he'd seen behind the bank. He figured he'd hike out to where they had been camping and see if they were still there. In his mind, they were his connection to all the robberies – the newspaper and the TNT he found in the saddle bag. Of course, there were lots of reasons for men to carry TNT – he understood that. But they had shown an odd interest in the bank – odd because their interest was in the back of the building.

The trek took no more than twenty minutes on foot. He left the road well ahead of where he had turned off before, wanting to make sure he stayed out of sight. He smelled the campfire well before he could see it. It smelled like meat – maybe they had scored rabbit or squirrel. He slowed as he approached and stooped low as he made his way to the wooded slope just to the east, where he could belly down and not only see what was going on but, he figured he could get close enough to hear them talking.

He had been wrong on his first guess – it was a ham on a spit warming over the fire, not local game. That suggested they had access to a pretty good larder (supply of ready to use food). That was certainly not the usual case for a group of saddle tramps. It further reinforced his idea they were connected with the carnival – the Gypsy family to be specific. They would carry a large supply of food with them.

He could hear the conversation – well, bits and pieces of it at least. One was unhappy they had to wait around four more days. Four days would take them through Saturday.

That would be the day Johnny expected the bank to be robbed. It would be the end of the celebration and the bank would contain the most money. Another mark that suggested to Johnny they were up to no good – connected to the Gypsies or not.

With the carnival and rodeo only a mile or so away, why would three men choose to just remain out in the woods by themselves? It was all circumstantial evidence that no judge would allow, but it was adding up pretty well in Johnny's mind.

Then, there came the clincher. He heard a familiar name – Cappi. He couldn't determine just how it had been used, but he *had* heard it. Maybe if he had some evidence for the Marshal – like a stick of their dynamite.

He backed up a few yards and began making his way around the clearing to where the saddles and saddle bags were hung across a fallen log. He remembered that the bag he wanted was sewn in white thread. He crawled close. There it was. He knew he had to remain out of sight, quiet, and up wind from the three horses. The setting seemed ideal to him and he slithered over to behind the timber. Any mother rattlesnake would have been proud of his moves.

As luck would have it, the saddle bag that hung on his side – the far side from the men – contained the TNT sticks. He carefully removed just one, and slid backwards into the trees with the stick slipped into the waist of his trousers.

As bad luck would have it, he sneezed. The men stood. One picked up a rifle and took several steps in Johnny's direction. Johnny immediately had a plan. If they found him, he would lob the stick of dynamite into the campfire and create a diversion for his escape. He lay there flat on the ground barely breathing. From that position, he couldn't see the men. He heard them talking among themselves and decided none of the voices was moving in his direction.

Presently the voices quieted. After a few minutes, he slowly and carefully raised his head to take a look. They were back sitting and eating around the fire. One was pouring coffee from the big metal pot. The rifle was back against the rock where it had been originally.

Johnny backed himself some distance away before getting to his feet and as quietly as possible making his way to

the road. He moved the stick of explosive to his rear pants pocket and picked up his pace to a trot, hoping to put distance between him and the campsite.

Once back in town he stopped at the Marshal's office. It was empty. He put the dynamite out of sight in the top desk drawer and scribbled a quick note about it, leaving it out on top of the desk. It was just after six and he was famished.

Doc might still be at the restaurant although it was a bit late for him. Still he gave it a try. It seemed to be mostly Johnny's lucky day – well, evening, at least. Doc was at his table with Cilla. A two for one he figured.

"Hey. Two of my favorite people in the whole world," he said as he approached the table.

Doc turned to Cilla.

"Do you know this lad, ma'am?"

"Me. No. Never saw him before. Has a mean look about him. Better be careful."

"Okay, okay. Good joke. And that's not mean, it's starved. Any scraps for a starving thirteen-year-old?"

He had already taken a seat. Doc motioned to the waitress indicating another meal just like the one he had – steak, baked potato, green beans and bread.

"I got good stuff," he said leaning in close and speaking in a low, confidential tone.

He went on to relate the story of the three riders, from his first glimpse of them several days before to his most recent encounter. When finished, he asked:

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think the boy just may be on to something," Cilla said.

"It was a dang fool thing you just did," Doc began. "What have we been telling you about being careful?"

"You finished yelling at me now so we can get on to making a plan?" Johnny asked as his meal arrived.

He looked at Doc. "I'll pay you for this in the morning. You know that, right?"

"I do know that – even though I keep telling you I'm always happy to buy meals for my all-time star patient. You are my very best advertisement, you know."

"I guess I never thought of a doctor needing to advertise. Interesting. Anyway back to the plan."

“And what plan is that,” Cilla asked.

“That one we’re about to come up with.”

“Oh, yes, that one. How could I have missed that?”

Johnny looked back and forth between them.

“So? Where do we go from here?” he asked.

“Let’s review what we know,” Doc suggested.

Johnny took it upon himself to supply the summary.

“We know the Gypsies have been in the immediate vicinity of all the recent bank robberies here in eastern and middle Kansas during the past two months – probably longer if we had taken time to really research it. We know their pay wagon is filled with bills from the banks that have been robbed. We know that in each case there was an explosion used as a diversion at the time the robbery was taking place. I found three guys carrying lots of TNT that could be used to set off such a diversion. They also carried a clipping about one the robberies. They indicated they had to stick around until Saturday – Saturday night I’m thinking when they will rob the Red Bend Bank. And, they mentioned the name, Cappi, the man who owns the Gypsy’s carnival and the rodeo.”

“Anybody have any idea how they carry out the robbery?” Cilla asked.

“The Marshal is leaning toward an inside accomplice theory,” Johnny offered. “He figures that the thieves work out some arrangement with a bank employee ahead of time. That person furnishes the front door key and the combination to the vault.”

“But you don’t like that theory, I take it,” Doc said.

“Right. I don’t. I don’t have a full blown better theory, but I’ve got one percolating inside my head. Nothing to share yet.”

“How can we help if we aren’t to be privy (in on) to your idea?”

“I figure I may be wrong and if I share mine with you it may stifle (smother) your creative juices that you need to be using to find other possibilities.”

“It’s a puzzler, for sure,” Cilla said. “A robbery without any clear way of entering the bank or the vault. Tunnel?”

“Two feet of concrete for the floor.

“Walls?”

“Three columns of hard brick set in place with mortar. And, the ceiling is three inches of iron. It’s identical to the one the Marshal and I examined the other night down in West Fork.”

“Sounds like one smart cookie that figured out how to do it,” Cilla added. “Any clues from the other robberies?”

“Not really. Most have a vault a lot like the one in our bank.”

“I think we are going about it all wrong,” Doc said. “Instead of trying to figure how they are going to do it, why not just be waiting for them inside the vault?”

Johnny took out his big red handkerchief. It was tied in a knot, which he struggled to untie.

“I’m a genius with knots,” Cilla said. “Hand it over.”

She quickly had it untied and returned to Johnny.

He pointed to a white spot on it.

“I found white powder in various places inside the vault down in West Fork. I have a theory it may be the leavings from some kind of knock out gas that they force into the vault ahead of time just in case there’s somebody waiting inside. Your suggestion also occurred to me that would be the ideal way to catch them. Anybody smart enough to figure all this out would have probably *also* figured that out, don’t you suppose?”

Doc nodded and picked up the hanky. He touched the powder and put some to his tongue. He smelled it.

“I think you have something, Johnny. Several gasses leave a powder residue behind when they combine with either the carbon dioxide or the oxygen in the air. I don’t have the means to analyze it, but the knowledge I have about such things tell me it is possible – very likely even. Very good detective work. I assume you have shared this with Cal.”

“Of course, I haven’t. He’d just say it’s my imagination running wild, which he seems to think is not a good thing. I tend to think it is one of my very best attributes (skills, or characteristics).”

The others nodded agreeing with Johnny.

“So, what approach is left?” Cilla asked. “They don’t enter the bank through the doors so a lookout for them would not be helpful. What’s left?”

“Like I said I have a theory, but I need to do a little more research before sharing it. You guys keep your thinking hats on and see if you can’t keep the Marshal and his deputies off my tail. Everywhere I looked today there they were – well, one of them at a time, at least.”

“I imagine he’s not spying, but trying to protect you from your own inquisitiveness.”

“Hadn’t thought of it that way. Still, it’s really cramping my style.”

“The boy has a style, now, Cilla. Have you become aware of a style?”

“Other than his continual chattering, his penchant (tendency) for overlooking direct orders, and the way he uses his charm to get absolutely anything he wants, I guess not.”

Johnny took in the byplay with a broad smile. He loved it when the two of them went on about him.

“I think you are finally getting the hang of me.”

They laughed and Johnny excused himself, slipping the remaining three cookies into his pants pockets. He certainly wouldn’t want to starve on the way home that night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning the boys met as arranged in front of the telegraph office. The telegram had arrived. Gus was clearly confused by its contents and hoped Johnny would clear it up for him. He wouldn't.

'CILLA – RED BM RIGHT THIGH. MOTHER THRILLED. ADVISE RE MEETING.'

It made immediate sense to the boys – a red birthmark on his right thigh and the mother was eager to get together with the boy.

Abbot leaped in the air and twisted 360 degrees. He was clearly elated as well.

"It's really Cilla's telegram so we need to deliver it to her," Johnny said. She won't be at the office yet, but we can leave it on her desk so she'll see it first thing when she gets there."

"I wonder if she'll let me have it," Abbot said. "It's like the first contact I've had – like a re-birth certificate."

"I'm sure she will. We can leave her a note to that effect."

That done they went outside and sat on the board sidewalk, backs against posts and feet on the dirt street.

"So, when does the train run to Garden City," Abbot asked.

"Wednesday afternoons."

"That's today. I need to find Garbo and make arrangements."

"Will he be alright about it?"

"I spoke with him and Mary – his wife – last night and

she convinced him I should go and see her. She spoke about family ties and duty to one's blood line and that seemed to convince him. I'll probably get picket duty for the next month to make up for missing a day's work, but that's fine."

"Picket duty?"

"Watching the horses at night. The older boys take turns. It's a job that holds lots of responsibility. Horses are a very important part of our livelihood. It's the only time I'm allowed to carry a rifle – coyotes and wolves, you understand."

"You go take care of things with Garbo. I'll check with Gus to get the train schedule. The station is about an hour's ride south of here. You have a horse?"

"I'm sure I can use Montague."

"Montague?"

"My favorite riding horse. If I enter the race on Saturday, I'll be riding Montague. I pretty much take care of her."

"Montague is the name of a girl horse?" Johnny asked.

"I know. I never asked. Didn't seem all that important I guess."

"Meet you in front of the telegraph office," Johnny said.

Abbot was off at a full out run. It was punctuated with enough leaps into the air and fists thrashing above his head to make one think the lad just might be happy about something! The Gypsy camp was along the creek nearly a mile south east of town. Johnny watched him out of sight. He was strong and fast for his slender build.

The train would arrive at the station to the south in the early afternoon. That was as precise as train schedules could be in the west in those days. They would need to leave by ten thirty. Johnny would arrange a lunch from Aunt Bea and the ladies at the church. He'd need to get Diablo. He found himself getting excited as well. He would also need to visit the bank and withdraw some money. Each ticket would cost several dollars and it would take four tickets for the two of them to travel both ways. Johnny didn't know if Abbot would want him to make the trip with him. He could always put the money back in the bank if it weren't needed, although, if the bank was going to be robbed it might be better to have his money in his pocket anyway.

He learned the fare, withdrew the money, and was sitting back against the building when Abbot reappeared on horseback.

“This is Montague,” he announced as he displayed a well-practiced dismount. “Did you get the information?”

“Sure did. Need to leave here by ten thirty. Train comes through early afternoon. I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to go along with you – on the train, I mean. I plan to ride down to the station with you.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I’ve never been on a train before, but I think this is something I need to do by myself.”

“I can understand that. There are several things we need to do this morning. Aunt Bee will pack lunches. We need to send Russell a telegram so the woman – your mother, I guess – will know when to expect you. Do you have a plan about returning? The next train back east from Garden City is Friday morning. We’ll get that ticket this morning. You can use it any time. Gus says you can stable your horse behind the telegraph office at the train station; his brother is the telegrapher down there. We need to wash your clothes – and you! With the tickets paid for and a good lunch to take along, you shouldn’t need much money.”

Abbot beamed.

“Gypsies can survive on very little money. I won’t need any.”

They left on foot for the fishing hole, and an hour later Abbot was sporting a clean, sun dried, set of clothes and the cleanest body he’d probably had since he was five years old.

It was already mid-morning.

“Will Montague allow double riders?” Johnny asked.

“She’s carried six kids before. I imagine she’ll feel just two is a pretty light load. Where to?”

“Out to my place – a half mile north east of town – to get Diablo. We can also arrange with my aunt for lunches and I have an idea there will be some freshly baked something-or-other in the kitchen.”

Abbot mounted Montague and gave Johnny a hand up behind him. They were headed back east on Main Street just as the first wave of visitors arrived to lose their money at the

suddenly awakened carnival booths.

Aunt Bea was still there, just removing a dozen cinnamon rolls from the cook stove. She was delighted to meet Johnny's new friend. The boys made short work of three rolls apiece. His aunt said she'd have lunches ready at the church shortly after ten. The boys and Montague then moved behind the house to the stable and met Diablo who seemed pleased to have a new lady in his life.

They got the buggy ready for Aunt Bea and tied it up out front.

Before long they were on the road back to town riding side by side. As boys will do, they gradually picked up the pace playing at seeing who had the fastest horse. They were soon galloping along full out – the two horses seeming to be a perfect match for each other. The 'race' was soon over and neither boy spoke of it, although each nodded his approval in the other's direction. Privately, each one knew he had held his horse back just a bit not wanting to reveal everything in case they might meet in the big race on Saturday. Being friends was one thing. Being competitors was an entirely different thing.

"I have to ask you something," Abbot said as they walked their horses on toward town.

"What?"

"Do all boys around here carry bars of soap in their saddle bags?"

Johnny broke out in laughter, then explained his summer bathing procedure, and *why* – in one word, Clair.

Abbot wasn't sure he fully understood such a cleanliness ritual, but didn't launch any more questions about it.

As they turned off the lane onto the main road to town Johnny glanced back and saw his aunt's buggy making its way along behind them. He was always glad to know she was alright. She was old and he knew that, like his parents, someday he would lose her, too. He tried not to think about it."

They visited the lemonade stand first and Abbot showed off his horse and talked with the boys while Johnny engaged Clair in some close order conversation. For some

reason, talking with each other just seemed better when their faces were close together and hands were being held between them.

Soon there was a line of people at the stand and Johnny and Abbot left.

“The boys said the stand took in nearly five dollars yesterday. That’s a great deal of money for a bunch of kids. How do you divide it up?”

“Oh, it’s not for us. All the money will go for new books for the school. We’re hoping to make fifteen dollars. That will buy nearly fifty new books.”

“I see. I had forgot about school. You go to school?”

Johnny explained his arrangement and how he planned on college and an eventual career as a writer.”

“You seem more like doctor material to me than a writer,” Abbot said.

“You and Doc. He’d already have me enrolled in medical school if it were up to him.”

It was worth a chuckle between them.

They sent the telegram announcing Abbot’s visit, then headed for the church. It was still a little early, but they figured a head start south would allow for a leisurely trip. They each privately wondered how much longer their friendship would last. The Gypsies would soon be moving on and one way or another Abbot would also be moving on. Neither boy dwelled on it deciding instead to enjoy whatever time they had left together. They talked about the things that boys have always talked about together: growing up, girls, life’s work, girls, what they enjoyed doing for fun, girls, and so on. [Did I mention girls?]

Johnny had never been to the railroad terminal, but understood if they kept to the creek they would come upon it. And, they did. It was a much larger complex than he had figured it would be. There were several huge corrals where cattle were kept waiting shipment back east to Kansas City. There was a second track – a siding, it was called – where empty cattle cars were left to be filled for the next east bound train.

He immediately understood why having it near a creek was so important – to water the hundreds of head of cattle

awaiting shipment.

The station master said the west bound was on schedule and should pull in between noon and one. It carried six empty cattle cars that would need to be maneuvered onto the siding track. It would have two passenger cars. They purchased the tickets and arranged for the care of Montague before searching out a shady place to wait and have lunch.

Of course, they started with the cinnamon rolls Johnny's aunt had included for dessert – surely that's why she had placed them on top – and then enjoyed roast beef sandwiches, potato salad and carrot strips. There was a second lunch for Abbot to have on the train ride. The trip south west would take seven hours. The boys were amazed that the train averaged a speed of a little over twenty miles an hour. The 150-mile, four-day trip by horse, would be made in just seven hours. What a great modern world they lived in!"

They heard the whistle in the distance and were at the station as the train pulled in. First, the empty cattle cars were dropped off. Then the mail was left at the depot. Finally, the new passengers – all three of them – were motioned on board. Inside, Abbot took a seat facing the station so he and Johnny could wave as he pulled out. The simple, slow, deliberate, hand motion hardly reflected the emotions boiling up inside each of them. But, boys played down such things back then – well, boys have played down their emotions ever since Mother Nature invented boys.

Johnny and Diablo were soon headed north along the road beside the creek. As they set a slow pace, the mail rider from the train station passed them at breakneck speed. He couldn't have been a whole lot older than Johnny. It was all that was left of the Pony Express that had reliably and rapidly carried the mail west from St. Joseph, Missouri, during the early 1860's. The telegraph and train soon made it obsolete. Johnny enjoyed reading about the young riders facing the worst of weather and attacks by outlaws and Indians. He sometimes fantasized about how exciting it would have been to have been one of them. In fact, he had begun writing a story about it.

He really hadn't tried his hand at many of the carnival booths and thought it might be fun. He had some money left

from the morning. He remembered the advice he'd been given: Don't take more money than you can afford to lose. He figured he could afford to lose a dollar so slipped the rest into his boot pretending he didn't have it.

He tied Diablo behind the livery stable on a long tether within easy reach of the high grass and water trough. He knew he'd be safe and stay as cool as it was possible to be on that extra warm October day. Then he headed for the Lemonade Stand, hoping Clair would agree to walk with him up and down Main Street. Maybe he could even win her something – a bag of candy or a corn husk doll.

She agreed. The other girls at the stand giggled. The boys patted him on his back. It was apparently a bigger deal than he figured it would be. He hopped her huge brothers wouldn't think he had done anything improper.

They had a good time together. Johnny even managed to win her a few things. She had to be home by three so he walked with her. Before she went inside, she looked into his eyes and squeezed his hand. He did the same back. In that place and time, it was the equivalent of the most romantic exchange either could imagine. They knew about kissing, of course, but in that day, such a thing only took place between proper young people after they were engaged to be married. And Johnny was NO WHERE NEAR ready for that!

While talking with Nicholas at the leather shop earlier, several questions had occurred to him about the robberies. He sat in the shade of the big oak that arched its huge branches out over the black smith's shop, and composed a telegram.

He wondered how it should be signed. It would be sent to three of the sheriffs in towns where bank robberies had occurred and ask for specific pieces of information. He wasn't ready to share his hunches with the Marshal, but the telegrams needed to appear to have some authority behind them. He decided he would sign them, 'For Marshal Calvin – Red Bend'. It wasn't really a lie because in the end the information *would* be for Cal. He felt alright about it, even if it might stretch the truth just a bit. He'd need to stay near the telegraph station to intercept the return telegrams before they got delivered to the Marshal. The returns should occur quickly since the questions had simple answers that would

take no research on the parts of the sheriffs.

He sent the telegrams.

“Put it on the Marshal’s tab?” Gus asked as he took out his big account book ready to make the entry.

“No. For some reason, I have cash for these.”

Gus gave him a look suggesting he thought it was strange – out of place, even – but he shrugged and accepted the several bills from Johnny. Johnny chose not to explain why he had to remove his right boot to retrieve the money.

He returned to the sidewalk and slid his back down the wall to a sitting position, his legs stretched out in front of him. As he sighed a big sigh, figuring he’d be settling in there for an hour or so as he waited, he noticed the flag being raised in front of Doc’s office. Actually, it was two flags. The main flag was Doc’s call for assistance from the Marshal. Johnny had added a smaller, triangular shaped green flag that meant Doc needed him – Johnny. He figured Mrs. Alsip was having her baby. Johnny often went along to help with the family while Doc delivered babies. He raced across the street and took the steps two at a time.

“The Alsip baby?” he asked.

“Right. The oldest boy just rode into town to tell me. He’s already headed back. You carry that second bag and let’s get on our way.”

Not waiting for Doc, Johnny ran down the stairs and around the corner to the Livery Stable to get Doc’s horse hitched to the buggy. The owner of the stable helped. By the time Doc arrived and got things settled into the buggy, it was ready to roll.

“Thanks Ben,” Doc called to the owner as Johnny already had them on the way out the back door. That way, they could avoid the sea of people on Main Street. The Alsip place was three miles west of town. The final mile was across a meadow with no real road or trail to follow. Doc provided directions once they reached that point.

Jake Alsip, the husband, was outside to greet them. The five children – all boys – were playing in the yard. Michael, who had ridden to town, was the oldest, although he was only ten. He had been through the process before and knew his job was to keep his brothers occupied.

Doc joked with Jake.

“Keep this up and you’ll have your own platoon by the turn of the century.” (A platoon consisted of two or three dozen soldiers.)

“Hope this one’s a cook,” he returned, meaning he figured it was time for a girl.

Doc and Jake went inside. Johnny moved the group of boys some distance away from the house and organized a ball game – Doc always carried a ball and bat in his buggy for just such occasions. Johnny had played a lot of ball back in Kansas City and could hit pop flies with great accuracy. He saw to it that each kid received his fair share.

Two hours later their father stepped out onto the porch with a brand-new life in his hands to show his children.

“Meet, Madeline Grace Alsip, children.”

“A girl! The seven-year-old said in disgust. What we gonna do with a girl?”

Johnny and the men laughed. Johnny could still remember back to the time when he, too, thought girls were nothing but a big bother and a part of the species to be avoided at all costs. My, how that had changed during the past couple of years.

Presently, Doc emerged from the house, declaring the mother was doing well. He suggested Michael should ride over to the McClain place and have the grandmother come and stay for a few days. The boy was soon bare backing it across the meadow to the north. In those days, the oldest boy was expected to take on lots of responsibility in a family, regardless of his age.

Johnny understood that. Although he had no younger brothers or sisters he had immediately tried to assume the role of the man of the house when he arrived to live with his Aunt Bea. It meant he had lots of things to learn about being really helpful there on the frontier. It also meant his Aunt had lots of things to learn about allowing somebody else take charge of the things she had always taken care of herself. They were both still learning how to play their new rolls. They were also still learning how to be patient with each other.

So long as the wood was chopped and the cinnamon rolls kept coming they each figured they were on the right

track.

On the way back to town, Johnny set an easy pace – he had pressed the horse a bit on the way out wanting to make certain Doc arrived in time. He understood babies had no way of waiting until the doctor had arrived and was ready to receive them.

He brought Doc up to date on both the robberies and Abbot's situation. He held nothing back about the robberies knowing Doc needed to be his listening post in order to make sure he was thinking things through correctly. Doc seemed impressed. That always made Johnny feel good – competent and accepted.

"You sort of stretched things signing the telegrams the way you did."

"I know. It's not that I'm trying to keep anything from the Marshal, but he's so busy keeping the town orderly this week I figured there was no reason to clutter up his mind with possibilities until I could change them into probabilities."

"I declare, you could talk a king out of his kingdom, young man. Maybe writing is to be your thing, after all. Thanks for your help with the Alsip clan, by the way. I saw you hitting balls. You're very good. Not much chance for that sort of activity here in Red Bend. Do you miss it?"

"Quite honestly, I still miss lots and lots of things about my old life, but I tell myself it's only been a few months. I'm pretty proud of the way I'm fitting in out here. It would be a lie to say it's been easy – every day it's hard and every day I miss how things were. I assume that's all normal."

It had really been a question, of course – one of those all teens ask that don't have question marks at the end.

"Goodness yes. Cilla and I have talked about it and we both think you are doing an admirable – in many ways unbelievable – job of transplanting yourself away from the sophisticated, clean, and sanitary life in the city to the roughhewn, dust and mire of the frontier. We can't imagine how difficult it must be."

"I figured you understood. I think it's good that you are letting me take care of it – I mean that you aren't offering lots of advice that no teenager would ever want to hear. It might help in the short run. I understand that, but in the long run, I

believe it's best if I learn all this stuff on my own."

"You're a wise lad. May I, though, be so bold as to offer just one piece of advice as you embark on the journey through your teen years?"

"You know you can. Of course, whether or not I take it will be up to me."

Doc nodded that he understood – expected it to be that way, even. He continued.

"When something you're thinking about doing seems like it would be too dangerous for most other people to try, don't ignore that fact – take more time to think it through. If it's probably too dangerous for others it is probably too dangerous for you. Boys your age often feel they are invincible – you know invincible?"

"Like unable to be hurt or fail?"

"Close enough. Just remember, enough boys your age have been hurt or killed doing those sorts of things to make any intelligent boy stop and figure the odds – they are always stacked against you. End of sermon."

"Thanks for that. You know boys my age pretty well."

"I was one, once, you know. At this point in my life I am fully amazed that, considering some of the dumb and risky things I did, I survived to even see twenty."

Before he let it go, Johnny paraphrased what seemed to be the message in all that Doc had just said: "When something you're thinking about doing seems like it would be too dangerous for most other people to try, it's probably too dangerous for you as well."

He nodded – it meant he understood Doc's meaning. He'd have to think on it before accepting it outright.

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CHAPTER NINE

After helping Doc get things up to his office and taking care of the horse and buggy, Johnny headed to the telegraph station. The three responses to his telegrams were waiting for him.

“I was about ready to run them down to the Marshal’s office myself,” Gus said.

“Sorry. I went with Doc out to the Alsip’s place. A new baby girl – red, wrinkled and screaming. Doc says those are all good signs. Hard to imagine I was ever that tiny.”

Gus handed over the telegrams seeming pleased for the Alsip’s. Big families were important for farmers. It took lots of kids to work the fields and care for the livestock.

Johnny moved back outside before reading the wires (as telegrams were often called). Each one made perfect sense. He was sure he knew how the thieves pulled off the robberies. He still wasn’t ready to share his information with any one.

The sun was low in the western sky. Abbot was about to arrive in Garden City. Johnny wished he could help his new friend in some way, but figured the meeting and whatever came of it were up to Abbot and his mother. He couldn’t see why it wouldn’t go well.

His plan was to ride down and meet the eastbound train the next afternoon. If Abbot wasn’t on it he’d come back to Red Bend and wait to hear – telegram or letter. Diablo clearly liked the ride and from time to time showed his impatience until Johnny would give him his head and let him run full out for a mile or so.

A good horse – and Diab was definitely a good horse – could sustain a good gallop over ten miles before tiring. It was why the Pony Express offices had been spaced out at ten mile intervals across the plains.

Johnny knew his Aunt would begin to worry about him by sunset so he and Diablo headed home. It cooled down in a hurry once the sun left the sky. He carried a jacket in his saddle bags and slipped it on. Diablo was content to walk the distance. Johnny smiled. He could have covered the half mile faster on foot.

He put Diablo in the stable, but left the door open so he could come and go to the watering trough and meadow as he pleased. Aunt Bea's horse couldn't be trusted to stay home, so he was kept inside in a closed stall.

Johnny had smelled the beef stew and fresh bread a hundred yards from the front door. He was ready for a substantial meal. It wasn't the life he had ever thought would be his, but it was alright – good, even in many ways. He figured he was far more independent and self-confident than he would have been back in the city.

He checked the wood supply before entering the house. It was good for several more days unless Aunt Bea suddenly fell into a baking frenzy. It didn't take a whole lot of wood that time of year although he could tell come winter he'd be chopping every day. His plan during the next month was to try to cut twice what they needed every day and get a little head start on winter. He noticed his upper arms and chest were becoming more muscular since he'd arrived at Red Bend. He liked that and figured Clair did as well. Somewhere along the way his arms and back had stopped aching all the time. He figured that was also a sign his body was growing into the physical challenges of the frontier.

At supper, he shared the parts of his day he knew would interest his aunt. She always asked about Clair and Cal. Johnny was glad to fill her in on what he knew. He kept the detective work to himself, not wanting to worry her.

He did up the dishes while his Aunt whipped up a cake. He hoped he was doing his fair share to help around the place. He fed the horses and chickens, chopped the wood, often did the dishes and did his best to eat every scrap of food

she set before him. The cake smelled wonderful.

While it baked, his aunt sat in the rocker and knitted on the Christmas gifts she was making. Johnny suspected there would be a new sweater in it for him. He took a seat at the big round table in the main room and continued working on his Pony Express story. From time to time he would read a section out loud to get his aunt's opinion. He didn't always take it, but sometimes it just helped to hear the words instead of reading them.

The cake was every bit as delicious as its aroma had foretold. He was in bed by nine, again wanting to get an early start the next morning. Sometimes while he lay there waiting for sleep to come he'd think about the bigger and beautifully decorated room he had back in the city. He was not at all unhappy with the little, very plain one he had. In many ways, he figured it fit him better. He was soon asleep.

Breakfast consisted of steak and eggs with toast, milk and, of course, a large chunk of cake. She knew he planned to meet Abbot later in the day so she wrapped the last two slices for Johnny to carry in his saddle bags. She hoped at least one would actually get to his friend. Johnny did have a sweet tooth!

He hitched her buggy and tied the horse at the rail out front before leaving for town on Diablo. The week had gone by rapidly. The train was due in at ten that morning, meaning if Abbot was coming back that day he was already on board and heading east. He hoped things had gone well and was eager to hear all about it. He figured it would not be his place to ask questions. He would just listen patiently to whatever Abbot wanted to share. Well, he hoped he could do it that way. Boys his age were often impatient.

He found Doc and the Marshal at the restaurant. He joined them at Doc's usual table at the rear of the room, but passed on breakfast – "Well, maybe just some bacon and a couple of biscuits and gravy and a glass of milk."

Doc turned to Cal. "I'm afraid the boy suffers from HLS."

Cal frowned. Doc explained.

"Hollow Leg Syndrome. Can't fill the lad up."

Johnny had heard Doc's little joke before, but smiled

pretending it was something new.

Johnny began the conversation he had been waiting to have.

"If it is Cappi and the Gypsies that are behind the bank robberies, why do you suppose they bypassed some of the really biggest banks in the area?"

"I've been wondering the same thing," Cal said. "Can't figure it."

Johnny moved on without further comment about that.

"Any more on the rumor about the robbery that's supposed to take place here in Red Bend?"

"Nope. Only what I heard from Sheriff Benson down in Elmira last week."

"How did he come by that information, do you know?"

"He said it came from a very talkative drunk he had locked up overnight. A drifter I believe he said."

"I'm betting it was a carnival worker, myself," Johnny said spreading a big smile up at the pretty waitress who brought him his no-breakfast-thank-you.

"Might be. I don't have anything to go on other than what Benson said.

Cal stood to leave. Johnny had one more thing to say.

"Don't fret over it, Marshal. We aren't going to lose a single cent from our bank. I'll guarantee it. It's *in the bag* you might say."

Cal looked at Doc.

"You have any idea what the lad's talking about?"

"Hardly. I'm just a sawbones – not a mind reader."

The Marshal suspected Johnny knew something he wasn't sharing. Doc was certain of it and pressed him once Cal had left.

"Give, young man. Don't want you getting caught in the crossfire if it's to come to that."

"There will be no guns; just the expected diversionary explosion outside of town about one in the morning on Sunday while the money is all ready to disappear from town without a trace. I guarantee you I'm not about to let any of my money leave town with a bunch of bank robbers."

"That is not an explanation, young man."

"Here is what I need you to do, Doc. Have the Marshal

and one deputy out in front of the bank a little before six o'clock Sunday morning. It might be well to make sure there is an empty cell at the jail as well. It will be getting a new resident. Don't tell him 'til Sunday morning or he's likely to ruin everything. Cal just wades in guns blazing sometimes."

"You say a lot of words, but I hear no real information," Doc said. "Do I need to be concerned about your welfare? Of course I do. I always have to be concerned about your welfare. You're a teenager!"

"Can I count on you to handle the Marshal?"

"Of course, you can. No new babies due in the area until late December. Ben and Mary Miller just may have a new little something in their stocking on Christmas morning."

Johnny changed the subject.

I'm riding down to the train siding to meet Abbot this morning – provided he's coming back today. I'm betting he will. I figure a few hours for a first meeting between him and his mother should be plenty long. Probably tell each other everything they know about themselves and the entire universe in the first ten minutes. I've found that's often how it is when meeting somebody for the first time."

Doc nodded that he understood.

"You and he seem to have hit it off pretty well, haven't you?"

"We have. We have more in common than one might think."

Doc nodded again not pressing for details. He knew they'd come out when Johnny was ready to provide them.

"I need to be on my way south," Johnny said.

He reached into his boot and took out two one dollar bills handing them to Doc.

"Meals," he explained. "Don't make me make a scene over it and you know I can."

Doc raised his bushy eyebrows and accepted the money.

An hour and a half later Johnny spotted Abbot getting off the train. He couldn't read his expression. He hurried toward him.

"So?" he said/asked putting a hand on his shoulder.

"She is a very nice person. She was easy to talk with."

I can tell she loves me even though she hasn't known me for almost ten years. I'm not going to go live with her."

Johnny didn't understand the about face the words had taken.

"I'll need more . . . when you're ready to explain," he said.

They saddled Montague and headed north. Abbot remained quiet for the first several miles. Johnny remained true to his plan and didn't press for information.

Eventually, Abbot began talking.

"My name is James Allen Withrow. Her name is Jane. My father's name was also James. He was a silver smith. I don't have any brothers or sisters. She is one of the nicest women I've ever met; soft spoken, considerate, patient. She didn't press me to tell her all about my life with the gypsies. I figured she might be put off by the fact I'd lived with them. That's how most folks are. She and you people at Red Bend are the first I've met who haven't looked down on me for it."

"Well, that certainly sounds like a person you'd never want to see again."

"Sarcasm?" he asked, offering only the hint of a smile.

"Of course, it's sarcasm. I don't understand anything about your decision."

"She is very poor. She could never support me. She lives with her mother – my grandmother – who is sick and needs medicine and doctor's visits. I'd just be a burden."

"And did she say, 'Please don't ask to live with me because I can't possibly support you?'"

That garnered more of a smile.

"Of course, she didn't."

"Who was it that told me recently gypsies can get along well without any money?"

"I know. But that's different."

"Oh. How different?"

"Within my family, I have others. We take care of each other. Among us we have many skills – bakers, leather workers, carpenters, cooks, hunters – all the things people need in order to survive."

"Does she work – your mother?"

"She clerks at the general store for a dollar a week.

Maybe she and her mother can get by on that but not three of us.”

“And are you incapable of earning any money to help out?”

Abbot looked surprised at the question. If he thought *anything* good about himself, it was that he had always been able to help out. It put a major frown on his face and a new perspective in his head.

“I’m not hearing an answer?” Johnny said pushing a bit.

“Because your question caught me off guard. I’ve been thinking I’d just be an addition to her life and her responsibility and not thinking how I could become a helpful part of it – do you see what I’m saying?”

Taking a lesson from Doc, Johnny just nodded and let Abbot continue thinking out loud.

“I’m very good at tooling leather – that’s Garbo’s trade away from the carnival. He made this saddle. I’m a good worker with lots of stamina (doesn’t wear out fast). But, I haven’t had any formal schooling. What I’ve learned about school work I’ve picked up from the books Garbo gets me. Mary taught me how to read and do numbers when I was very small. Education isn’t valued by most of the people I’ve been living with. I guess I’m too old for school now.”

“I’m sure you’re not, but that’s a separate topic. If you had any choice, would you choose to live with your mother or stay where you are?”

“You ask very difficult questions. All I’ve ever known is the Gypsy life and the people in the family. I suppose I love them – well, some of them. I really haven’t ever thought about it. I can’t say I love my mother, either. I don’t know her. She does seem like an easy person to love. I guess I pity her. I think she pities me also. Not a good thing to begin a new relationship on – pity.”

“Seems like you’ve done some good thinking about it already.”

“It was a long train ride back.”

“I won’t try to tell you what should do, of course, but I do hope you’ll keep thinking about your options and how you could maybe become an important part of her life – their lives I guess really.”

It was Abbot's turn to just nod without comment. They rode on for a long time in silence. Johnny eventually broke it.

"So, what do you want for me to call you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Abbot or James?"

"I hadn't thought about that. I've always just known myself to be Abbot."

"What's Abbot's last name?"

"I don't have any other name – just Abbot."

"You *didn't* have *any* other name," Johnny said, pressing his friend to consider how things *really* were for him at that new point in his life.

"Yes. *Didn't*. It's a lot all at once, you know. On the train, I got to thinking about the name Jimmy and I really do believe I remember that. It's what Mrs. Withrow – Jane – my mother – called me right off yesterday. She said she'd have known me anywhere. I have my father's chin and nose and her blue eyes – another feature that always sets me apart from the Gypsies who have brown eyes. I'm sure she was telling the truth because I got off the train with three other young men and she came right to me and hugged me before she even spoke to me. It was a long and very pleasant hug. I've had very few of those – well, none really, that I can remember."

"No hugs?"

It saddened Johnny's heart. He wished he could share half of those he'd received during his life. That wasn't the way it worked, of course. Wonderful hugs were some of the things he remembered most about his life with his parents – especially his mother.

They soon had their horses tied out back of the church. It was lunch time and they entered through the rear door.

"Why are all the people looking at me?" Abbot asked in a whisper.

"I'm thinking it's because you and your clothes are clean and your hair is combed. First time they've seen you like this."

"Or," he came back with a big grin, "because I'm the handsomest boy in the room."

"Or that!" Johnny said, allowing the remark to go

unchallenged.

Truth be told, it would have been difficult to pick one of them over the other in the good looks department.

Aunt Bea came to them immediately and administered what had become her usual welcome hug to her nephew.

“Half for me and half for Abbot this morning, alright?”

Bea obliged without question or hesitation. If anyone had been counting seconds, the length of Abbot’s embrace would have won hands down.

Abbot had no idea how to respond so he didn’t. Johnny stood back and smiled. They were the first in line for lunch. Abbot hadn’t eaten since he had finished the lunch on the train the day before and his plate showed it.

“When do you work today?” Johnny asked at last.

“Not sure, but I need to find Garbo right away. I told him I’d do that as soon as I returned. Come and look for me later and I’ll know if I have any time off. It was really good to talk with you about things this morning. I’d like to think it all over in the new way you set out for me and talk some more, alright?”

“Of course. I’ll find you later. I’m glad you’re keeping an open mind about things.”

Abbot nodded. They finished lunch and then went their separate ways – Abbot back to camp and Johnny to the rear door of the leather shop to pick up his – well, Diablo’s – new reins. Again, he took time to look over the things sitting on the shelves and hanging from the ceiling. Nicholas was a fine craftsman – no doubt about that.

The new reins were perfect – bright red and both soft and strong. He paid for them and went right outside and replaced the old ones. Diablo seemed to approve, giving them a good sniffing as Johnny first showed them to him and explained how handsome he was going to be wearing them.

It called for a good run so they set out north along the road out of town – the one that passed near the camp of the men Johnny suspected of no good. He didn’t give into his urge to go see if they were still there. He gave Diablo his head let him run full out the way he loved to run. After several miles, the horse slowed down on its own. He had always had good sense that way. They turned and walked back toward

town.

As they approached the turn off to men's camp a shot rang out. Johnny bent low in the saddle and urged Diablo to pick up speed. He reined him to the left and entered the woods on the opposite side of the road where he dismounted and began surveying the situation.

Had the shot been intended for him? Why? Did the men suspect Johnny knew something they didn't want him to spread around? Was it just a warning to keep whoever he was away from their camp?

He remained quiet and watched across the road from behind Diablo. Presently one of the men appeared through the trees. He walked in Johnny's direction. Johnny mounted up – still out of sight – but prepared to make a dash for it if there was another move in his direction.

The man stopped, bent down and picked up a rabbit, apparently one he had just shot for lunch. Johnny was relieved to say the least. He waited until the man disappeared back into the woods then resumed his ride to town. His heart was still beating rapidly and he picked up the pace to a trot.

In town, he checked in on Doc who he didn't disturb because he was taking one of his 'cat naps'. He napped for a few minutes several times throughout the day to make up for short nights when there had been medical emergencies he had to attend to. During Red Bend Days, there seemed to be medical emergencies every night. It was a rowdy crowd of saddle bums that followed the rodeo. Johnny figured if Doc actually got paid for every cut he stitched up, every broken bone he set and every sprained ankle he taped up, the old gentleman could afford to buy him breakfast once in a while.

It had been an interesting week there in that little community:

The Marshal did his best to keep order. Doc did his best to patch folks up. Cilla did her best to accurately report on the events. Aunt Bea did her best to feed the crowd lunch. Clair did her best to quench the visitors thirst. Abbot did his best to take the gullible people's money at the carnival booths. Johnny asked himself what *he* did – oh, yes, solve the case of the Red Bend Bank Robbery. He needed to get back to that immediately.

CHAPTER TEN

Eventually, Saturday morning arrived – time for the big race. It cost a whole dollar to enter – not a problem for Johnny, but of course he'd never let on about that. The first prize was a new handmade saddle – something Johnny could have easily afforded, but, again, he wouldn't let on about that, either.

The entry booth was set up in front of the Marshal's office. You paid your dollar and received a red card that would be handed to the officials at the start of the race – it verified each entrant had paid. Johnny bought two in case Abbot decided to enter; in case Abbot couldn't afford the fee; in case Abbot would accept Johnny's gift of it. He knew there were a lot of 'in cases' but believed it was the thing to do.

He went looking for his new friend and found him running the marksmanship booth again. Abbot was clearly happy to see him and said he'd be off in time for the race.

"I picked up an entry card for you, in case you and Montague are going to race."

He made no mention of the fee, which Abbot didn't seem to know about. He gladly accepted the card.

"How many racers will there be?"

"The Marshal expects about two dozen. I'm told about half will drop out at the half way point when they see they have no chance to place. That will make more room for the fastest of the lot to maneuver toward the finish. It will be my first race ever. How about you?"

"We race often when we have free time. Gypsies are

known to be very good horsemen.”

“So I’ve heard. I guess we’re about to find out.”

And with that, their competitive spirits began to emerge. They both, privately, had the same strategy – hold back in the middle of the pack and then give their mounts their heads a hundred yards from the finish line. Both horses were strong finishers. The boys were both eager to see what the other one really had.

“Will there be others from your family in the race?” Johnny asked.

“Gypsies? No. It’s not the custom for our grown men to compete with locals. Tends to build bad blood, I’m told.”

“Glad you can enter. This should be great, you know?”

“Great for you if you like being beat?” Abbot came back with a smile.

They both wanted to win, but they knew whatever the outcome, it wouldn’t affect their friendship.

* * *

The horsemen began gathering at the starting line in front of the stage office ten minutes before the race. They milled around and put each other’s horses down – “That nag couldn’t beat a mule with broken hind legs,” “Your horse is so slow it won’t cross the finish line ‘til after church services in the morning,” and so on. It was a part of the tradition and men worked all year to come up with the best put down line.

Johnny and Abbot didn’t participate in that part of the goings on. They were the only teens to be entered that year and had a large cheering section of school age children along the sides of the street. Clair was there. Johnny smiled at her once, but figured he needed to keep his mind on the race if he were to have a chance to place.

One of the officials came by to collect their red cards and move them up to the starting line. As tradition dictated, it would be the Marshal who would start the race by firing a single shot into the air.

It was finally time. The boys sat tense in their saddles ready for that moment. The horses seemed to sense something important was about to take place.

The Marshal stepped into position at the line. He raised his pistol high over his head. The crowd grew silent.

“Ready . . . set . . . bang.”

It was best to stay in front of the pack at least until out of town because the dust from the hoofs against the dry dirt street set up a tremendous cloud of lung choking dust. It was Diablo and Montague in the lead, head to head, as they left town.

As if planned, they both then eased up a bit and settled back into the pack. It was a cool morning and the air seemed fresh and moist – ideal conditions for a horse race.

There were ‘monitors’ all along the route, men charged with seeing that the race was fair – no crowding or pushing or slugging one another to gain some edge. In the days before monitors, riders literally took their lives in their hands to participate.

Both horses were running easy. Montague seemed to feel comfortable with the event. Diablos not so much. It was his first race in which there were lots of other horses. It seemed clear to him, however, that Johnny wanted him to run so he would run!

As predicted at the half way point many of the riders pulled up their mounts, content to just follow along behind and watch what they could through the cloud of dust that hung heavy ahead of them.

Johnny and Abbot carefully made the turn around and, remaining side by side, they began inching up on the remaining riders. A quarter mile out the horses were still running with ease and they remained side by side. Again, as if planned, at the city limit sign they both leaned low in the saddle – a clear signal to both horses to give it all they had, and they did.

They flew by the few horses that were still ahead of them and the gap continued to increase as they entered the final stretch. Head to head they flew down the street to the cheers of the crowd. Women waved hankies and men their hats. Teen boys finger whistled and old men spat tobacco juice.

Thirty yards out and they were still head to head. Twenty yards out and they were still head to head. They leaned down even further, each boy offering encouragement to his horse –

“Now boy, give it all you have,”

“Go girl, it’s time for your big finish.”

Hooves pounded against the hard dirt. The boy’s hearts raced in their chests. The kids jumped up and down along the street. The old timers had never seen such a race.

Ten yards, five yards, the finish line!

The two galloped on to the end of the street before pulling up and turning to head back and get the verdict from the Marshal. The outcome had not been clear to either of them. They stopped, side by side, at the finish line. The crowd was still cheering. The boys removed their hats and waved them in a thank you gesture to the people who had by then broken out onto the street and were crowding close.

Johnny figured that Montague’s longer head might have given her the edge at the last second. Abbot thought the way Diablo had lowered his head at the finish line might have given him the edge.

Still mounted and side by side by side, the boys turned to each other and shook hands. That sent the crowd into another frenzy.

The Marshal and the three other judges were still huddling together on the sidewalk. Presently, the Marshal steeped forward, raising his hands to quiet the gathering.

“First, let me say that in the history of this Red Bend Days race – all thirty-one of them – there has never been a more exciting finish. There are four judges. Let me give you the results as seen by each of the four of us. Jeb saw it as a tie. Malcolm gave the edge to Abbot. Jacob gave the edge to Johnny.”

The boys held their breaths. It all came down to the Marshal. How had he seen things? Everybody knew he and Johnny were close, but everybody also knew he’d call it like he saw it. Cal was an honest man.

“I saw it as a dead heat to the finish line. We judges, therefore declare, this Thirty-First Red Bend Days One Mile Race to have ended in the first tie ever. Congratulations to both of you young men. The committee will have to determine how to handle the prize.”

The boys dismounted. Clair ran forward and without thinking administered a rib busting hug to Johnny. He happily

hugged her back, hoping it didn't mean they were engaged. Aunt Bea made her way through the crowd and seeing Johnny and Clair, proceeded to give Abbot the hug of his young life as well. Soon everybody was hugging everybody.

"What the heck," Doc said as he stood there on the walk next to Cilla. "Come here old lady," and they shared a hug for the first time in all the years they'd known each other.

It hadn't gone unnoticed by Johnny who would most certainly follow up on it with both of them later (although that may have to wait until the next book in the series).

* * *

The carnival booths were down and packed up by two o'clock. The rodeo equipment had been taken down early that morning.

"So, when you leaving?" Johnny asked his friend as the boys made their way down the cliff to the creek for one last time together at the fishing hole. They sat back against the fallen tree trunk.

"The family is leaving in the morning. Moving on to Smithville for a one-nighter. I hate one-nighters."

Johnny wondered about the way Abbot had phrased his answer, beginning with 'the family' rather than 'we'. He let it go.

"I will miss you, you know," Johnny said. "I feel like we've known each other forever."

"Me too. I want to thank you for your friendship. I've never had anything like this before. I will always treasure it."

"I suppose this means we won't see each other again," Johnny said looking out across the water, sadness in his tone.

"I suppose . . . unless of course you ever take a mind to board that train and come see mom and me in Garden City."

"Really? That's your decision? To live with your mother. I'm so happy. I think you've made the right decision. I know from personal experience how hard it is to make a new start in a new place with new people. I know you will be able to do it, though. When you leaving?"

"Next train west, I suppose. I think I should send a telegram, don't you? I mean I don't just want to show up uninvited."

Johnny looked puzzled.

“She didn’t invite you live with her?”

“Well, yes, actually she did. I told her I had some thinking to do about it and she said she understood. She’d wait to hear from me.”

“I’ll borrow Aunt Bea’s buggy and take you and your things down to the train station.”

“That won’t be necessary. Garbo gave me Montague and the Marshal says you told him I should have the saddle from the race. Thanks. I know the one you have is special – coming from your Dad and all. It and my books will be all I have to take with me.

“Garbo and Mary doing alright about it?”

“Garbo said I should be with my own family. He said he was happy I had been part of his family during the past years. Mary cried and kissed me on my forehead. That was like her blessing, I think. I know I will miss them. It’s strange; I never considered the fact I would miss them if I left them. I guess I put my life on hold while I was there. I have a great deal to thank them for. There was no requirement that they take me in or treat me well. They are good people. We promised to keep in contact.”

“One last swim?” Johnny asked. “Sounds good and can I borrow that bar of soap. I figure I’m going to need to get used to keeping clean. It’s not something I’m looking for to, I can tell you that.”

They agreed to ride together to the railroad the following Tuesday morning; that would be the next westbound train. Until then, Abbot/James/Jimmy would stay with Johnny and his aunt – in the stable at his insistence. Garbo had given him five dollars – more than he had ever had in his possession at one time. He’d use one dollar to send the telegram. He had no idea whatsoever how he’d ever manage to spend the other four.

* * *

Early Sunday morning, Johnny slipped away and into town by himself. He had a bank robber to catch. He made himself comfortable on the sidewalk across the street from the leather shop. At promptly 5:45 he heard the explosion south of town.

The Marshal opened the door from his office and stood

there surveying the nearly empty street. He spotted Johnny. Presently a man came driving down the street in a buggy pulled by two beautiful white horses. He stopped and tied up in front of the leather shop and went inside. A few moments later he and Nicholas came back outside carrying the three valises – the leather bags – Nicholas had mentioned were to be picked up that morning.

Johnny stood and moved across the street. The Marshal, fully in the dark about what was taking place, walked to meet him.

“The bank has been robbed,” Johnny announced calmly.

The Marshal frowned.

“You will find the money from the robbery inside these bags – the brand-new suitcases.”

The Marshal’s frown turned to puzzlement.

“Go ahead, Marshal, take a look,” Johnny urged.

The man with the buggy protested.

“These are my property. You have no right to look inside. I have paid for them in full, is that not right Nicholas?”

“He has paid for them, Marshal.”

“And I am the Marshal. I look inside whatever I want to look inside of here in my territory.”

He hesitated just a moment and shot a quick glance at Johnny, whose nod suggested great confidence.

As the first valise was opened, the man tried to mount the buggy to make a run for it. Nicholas grabbed his arm. The case was filled with money, as were the second and third.

Johnny spoke again, directing it to Cal.

“Marshal, have you met this man – Capi – the owner of the Rodeo, the Gypsy Carnival and the Prairie States Construction Company?”

“I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure.”

At that moment, Mr. Yeager appeared at the door of the bank.

“We’ve been robbed. Sherriff. I don’t know how. I stayed here in the building all night.”

“It was a foolish thing to have done, Mr. Yeager,” the Marshal said. You could have been killed. Don’t worry, though, young Johnny here has already recovered the money

for you.”

A deputy arrived and took Cappi into custody and moved him down the street to the jail. Doc had been watching from upstairs and had by then made his way down the steps and across the street.

“How in the World?” were his only words as he stared into Johnny’s face.

“Come inside and I’ll explain,” Johnny said.

The men started for the bank.

“Not the bank; the leather shop,” Johnny said.

The men looked puzzled but followed him inside.

He walked to the east wall – the new east wall that had been installed by the Prairie States Construction Company after the fire six months before.

“Cappi had the fire set – just enough to make it necessary to close the shop for a week while repairs were made by his crew. He also planted the stranger riding by to alert people to it so it could be put out. If you will examine this wall the construction crew rebuilt you will see that this narrow, two foot, center section is screwed in place – not nailed like the rest.

“I am sure we will find that the workmen removed a section of the bricks from the back wall of the bank vault – just enough to give access to the vault. The back wall was covered by the wooden backs of the shelving so the change was never discovered. I got the idea when I saw the skid scratches on the vault floor down in West Bend. They were exactly where the back shelf would have made them when it was moved out from the wall so the robbers could enter.”

Johnny searched the wall for a few minutes running his hand over the surface of the removable section.

“Ah, here. A small hole through which the knockout gas was fed into the vault from in here to incapacitate anyone who might have been stationed inside. The money was removed, packed in these new leather bags and was to be loaded on the buggy and moved out of town with the Gypsies this morning. The shelves were pulled back into place from this side, the removable section screwed back on the wall, and the shelves in the leather shop put back the way they had been.

“When I noticed the vertical planking on the east wall – different from all the other walls – it made me begin wondering. Cutting an opening across horizontal boards would have left a vertical line across the boards – a cut line that would have been noticeable and impossible to explain. With the boards running up and down it was a simple matter to hide that cut between two of the planks. Upon examination earlier in the week, I spied the screw heads – three on each side of the opening and one in the middle of the top and bottom. It meant the thieves were only eight screws away from several thousand dollars. While the crew was working here I imagine Nicholas loaned them a key to the rear so they come and go as they needed to.”

Nicholas nodded.

“They copied the key so they’d have it to gain access to the store last night. I imagine only one came to minimize the risk of being seen. I think I can lead you to the men in a camp north of town who will have that key. The thief filled the new valises and left them where Nicholas had them sitting. Cappi was to pick them up this morning and nobody would ever be the wiser.

“I sort of borrowed your name, Marshal, and telegraphed three of the sheriffs in towns that had robberies and asked what stores were backed up against the vault wall to the bank. One was a barrel maker, one was a store that sold ladies hats – the sort that come in big, round, pasteboard boxes – and one was an undertaker. All three had experienced a fire within the past six months and all dealt in ready-made carry-out containers that wouldn’t raise any suspicion.”

“I’ve arranged a reward, Johnny,” Mr. Yeager said stepping forward.

“Sorry, Sir, but the last thing I need is more money to worry about. But, now if you’d be willing to contribute it to the newly established FTRLLSBWMTM, I think I know who the first recipient should be.”

“The what? The three men asked at the same time turning to stare down at Johnny.

The *Fund To Relocate Long Lost Sons Back With Their Mothers*. I figure fifty dollars would be a fair amount, don’t

you?”

“Consider it done,” Mr. Yeager said.

The Marshal wasn’t finished yet.

“You really shouldn’t have kept me in the dark, son, and having Doc get me out here on the street this morning without knowing what to expect could have been downright dangerous.”

“I figured I told you all the important things.”

“And like just what would that be?”

“Not wanting to make you worry about the details during this extremely busy week in your life, I waited and told you when I had the case solved – so you could concentrate on bar brawls and fights over pretty women.”

“He has you there, Marshal,” Doc said. “In fact his exact words were even more specific than that. If memory serves me right, he said, ‘It’s in the bag.’”

Johnny grinned.

Next time, perhaps, I should be more specific and say, ‘It’s in the valise – make that three of them.’”

THE END

Hey!

If you like the Doc and Johnny Old West Mysteries, you will probably also like the Orvie Mysteries about a 12-year boy who can see into the past and determine if people are telling the truth or not. He goes around the country and solves mysteries with local kids. Lots of excitement and adventures. And, oh yes, he’s been 12 years old for about 125 years. Hmmm!

The first book in that series is, The Boy Who Could See Into the Past. The author is also David Drake. There are six books in that series and are available as both ebooks and paper backs from Amazon.

Thanks for being a reader!!!!