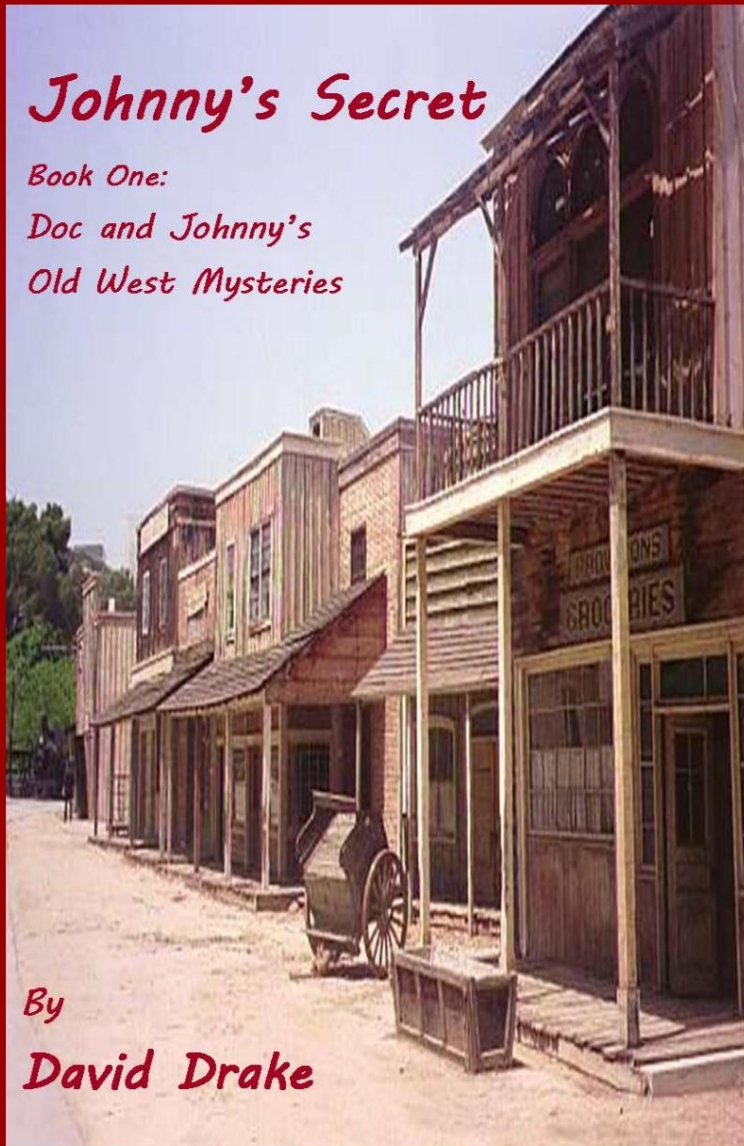


# *Johnny's Secret*

*Book One:*

*Doc and Johnny's  
Old West Mysteries*



*By  
David Drake*



# **Johnny's Secret**

*Book One* in the series:  
**Doc and Johnny's Old West Mysteries**

**By David Drake**

**Book One: Johnny's Secret**  
**Book Two: Red Bend Bank Robbery**  
**Book Three: The Pony Express Rides Again**  
**Book Four: Kidnapped**  
**Book Five: Mystery of the Crimson Bandit**  
**Book Six: Mystery of the Baffling Stagecoach Robberies**

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## **BACKGROUND**

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

*Many 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 in the east, was still the necessary choice for long distance travel through many remote parts of the plains states.*

*It would take nearly \$25.00 in today's money to equal the purchasing power of \$1.00 in 1880 Kansas. Salaries for most workers averaged between \$60 and \$200 a year.*

*Boys did grow to be thirteen, back then, and that's where our story begins.*

///

## **CHAPTER ONE: Red Bend, Kansas**

The young man felt the searing heat of a bullet smash its way through his thirteen-year-old flesh into the upper right side of his chest while bandits were holding up the stage coach in which he was riding west toward Red Bend, Kansas.

The driver and the only other passenger, a man who said he was from New Orleans, had been killed and fallen to the ground. After the young man was hit, he played possum on the floor. He was bleeding badly and the pool of blood in which he lay had apparently convinced the bandits he posed no threat to them. They rode off to the south with the strong box, celebrating their good fortune by firing round after round into the air.

He struggled to his feet and somehow managed to pull himself up to the driver's seat. He was in terrible pain and tears flowed shamelessly. The bullet had rendered his right arm virtually useless. He had driven teams many times before, but never a team of six. With his left hand, he gathered up the reins that led to the two lead horses and with a quick flick of the leather, urged them to move out.

He understood that if he didn't get medical attention soon he would bleed to death. He flipped the leather reins even harder and the team picked up the pace. By the time they reached the outskirts of Red Bend, the boy was so weak he could no longer hold the reins. The horses were running wild. His vision went black and he slumped over in the seat.

The Marshal, Cal Calvin, seeing the trouble, ran to meet the stage. He leaped up onto one of lead horses and

soon had them pulled to a halt. Other men rushed to offer their help. One of them mounted the front of the stagecoach and handed the boy's nearly lifeless body down to those waiting on the street. The Marshal carried him up the long flight of outside stairs to Doc Weber's place above the newspaper office and offered what he knew of the situation.

Doc had been the only source of medical help within fifty miles of Red Bend for the past forty years. In his day, he had dug more than his share of bullets from men's bodies, but had never become used to it. 'Human flesh and hot lead were never intended to mingle,' he had been heard to say more than once. Fortunately, he figured, he had seldom been called upon to remove them from boys as young as the one bleeding his life away there on the table in his office.

He cut away the boy's blood soaked shirt. His first order of business was to stop the bleeding or there would be no need to remove the bullet.

"Thank goodness the boy's unconscious," he said.

Marshal Calvin had remained with Doc to offer what help he could. Doc double folded a towel and placed it over the wound. He had the Marshal press on it with both hands, applying pressure that he hoped would stop the blood flow and allow the damaged area inside the chest to clot.

Fifteen minutes later they removed the bloody towel. The bleeding had essentially stopped.

"His breathing is clear," Doc said. "The bullet must have missed the lung."

Doc poured alcohol over the area.

"You know the drill, Marshal. I'll have to slip these long tweezers deep enough into the wound so I can locate that slug and pull it out. If he should awaken while I'm fishing around in there you'll have to restrain him – the pain will be unbearable."

"We've been here before with men twice his size," the marshal said. "Go after it."

Mercifully, the boy did not come to. His breathing became shallow. His heart raced out of control. Doc probed for some time eventually withdrawing the tweezers in a slow, steady motion. He had the slug. It appeared to still be in one piece. That was fortunate. Doc shook his head and flashed the Marshal a concerned look. He added more alcohol around



the wound, then cleaned the skin with soap and water. He dried the area and applied a bandage.

“He’s going to be in severe pain for some time – days. His fever will soar. I’ll keep him here for the time being. Any idea who he is or why he was on the stage?”

“None. I’ll go check the luggage. He should have a bag or trunk. Maybe that’ll tell us something.”

“Help me move him to a bed before you leave.”

The marshal carried the boy into Doc’s bedroom and laid him down on the spare bed, kept there for just such emergencies. It was the closest thing to a hospital within a hundred miles. He turned to Doc.

“You be okay, here?”

Doc nodded and flicked the back of his hand, indicating for the Marshal to leave.

“I’ll send word as soon as I know anything,” the Marshal said. “It may have to wait ‘til the lad can tell us his story, himself.”

Doc removed his sweat covered, octagonal, glasses and dried them with the back of his tie – a familiar sight to those who knew old Doc Weber. Doc was short of stature, with thin, white hair. An equally white moustache occupied his upper lip. His bushy eyebrows remained darker and his skin tan and leathery from sixty-five years under the unrelenting, Kansas, sun. He was a thoughtful, man and not given to emotion. He took his work and his life quite seriously.

Doc had the respect of everybody in and around the relatively isolated little town of Red Bend. The small community had received its unique name because the creek that bordered it on its eastern edge made a sharp turn east there and had cut its way through the red rock that underlay the area. As a result, the water took on a reddish hue.

For several decades, Red Bend had consistently maintained a population of something in the vicinity of 500 people and was the trading center for a large surrounding area of ranchers and farmers. It had five, hard packed, dirt streets running east and west – the central one being ‘Main’ – and six running north and south. Main Street was relatively wide as streets went in those parts and the primary businesses lined up on both sides of its middle two blocks. They were wooden,

mostly two story buildings, more darkened by time than painted. Among others, there were the marshal's office, a saloon, the stage office, the newspaper office, the general store, a lumberyard and hardware combination, the telegraph office, a bathhouse, a bank, a restaurant, a black smith's shop, the livery stable, the hotel and the undertaker.

Typically, the owners of the stores and businesses lived upstairs with their families. The community church sat at the east end of town, close to the creek, handy for baptisms. The houses were mostly one story, some having a sleeping loft for the children. The school – very old and badly in need of repair – was on the far western edge of town. It maintained first through 8<sup>th</sup> grades – more students in each lower grade than in the upper grades. Boys were expected to be working by the age of fourteen which made it impractical to offer classes beyond the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The community was proud of its school and employed well qualified teachers – requiring at least a high school education.

The cattle trail along which the herds moved north out of Oklahoma and Texas in the summer to graze the open range in the Dakotas and then back south in the winter toward the railroad to be sold, lay just west of Red Bend. During the drives, it brought lots of cowhands to town and with the cowhands came trouble for Marshal Calvin. He had always handled it, and his presence meant law and order to all who came in contact with him. He was fair and understood about men needing to have a good time, but insisted that the public safety be maintained.

He examined the stagecoach which had been left where it stopped in front of the general store. The stage master was tending to the horses and leading them two at a time to the corral behind his station. Cal counted more than twenty bullet holes in the sides of the coach and even more that had been caught by the luggage and freight tied on the back and top. He thought the boy was fortunate to have escaped with only one wound.

There was actually little in the way of luggage – one valise (suitcase) that had apparently belonged to a man, and a trunk with boy's things in it, which he assumed would be those of Doc's young patient. He carried the trunk to the newspaper

office. For its size, it was very heavy.

The editor was a strong minded, straight talking woman in her late fifties – Pricilla West, called ‘Cilla’ locally. She dressed in long sleeved blouses, ankle length heavy skirts and boots. She had inherited the paper from her father a number of years before. She wrote things the way she saw them and pulled no punches. Law abiding citizens respected and supported her. The others, not so much.

“Cilla, I need you to go through the things in this trunk and see what you can learn about the boy it belongs to. He was severely hurt in what was certainly a stage hold-up a few miles east of town. Probably the Miller gang. They’re known for firing off lots more rounds than are necessary and that coach was riddled with holes.”

“How’s the boy?”

“Not good. Not really holding his own. One shot in the upper right area of his chest. Lost a lot of blood and is really weak. Doc got the slug out and bandaged him up. He expects a high fever to set in soon and last for days.”

“I’ll go through his things and let you know what I find out, then I’ll go up and spell Doc. I’ve done my share of sponging feverish foreheads in my day. You know Doc forgets to eat when things get serious like this. Make sure somebody takes him food.”

The marshal nodded, tipped his hat, and left.

Cilla pulled a low stool close to the trunk and began going through its contents. There were clothes on top – city clothes, way too fancy to be worn by a boy there in Red Bend. She’d have to find him some that would be more suitable if he were going to stick around. The boots and winter coat would be acceptable. There were several pictures – one was probably of parents since another was of them and a son. There was a copy of a newspaper, *The Kansas City Sentinel*, a small, but respected paper. Being in the business, she looked inside for the name of the editors – Winston Pettigrew, editor in chief, and Jonathon Baker, assistant editor. Neither name rang a bell for her.

Her attention was drawn to the lead story on page one – Headline: *Jonathon Baker and wife, Emily, killed in house fire: The City Morns*. The article went on to praise the man as

an upstanding member of the community and an important part of the newspaper's family. It recounted numerous charitable activities that Emily had directed in the area. They left behind one son, Johnny, age twelve. The paper was dated a month to the day before.

As women will do when confronted with stories like that, Cilla sniffled and allowed a few tears to find their ways down her cheeks.

"That poor child," she said out loud.

She continued through the boy's belongings. In a small pasteboard box she found a large magnifying glass, a compass, a spy glass, a false moustache, two pocket knives each with a variety of types of blades, a piece of steel and flint, and a slingshot. The bottom of the trunk was covered with books – school text books, a dictionary and thesaurus, history books, science books, a two-volume encyclopedia, a half dozen mystery novels, a tattered copy of *Treasure Island*, and others.

"No wonder it was so heavy," she said, again out loud.

Cilla often talked to herself. She said it helped clear her mind and sort out that which was vital from the trivial. She sometimes spoke the words in a story as she set them down on paper. Cilla was just what Cilla was, and anybody who had a problem with that would just have to live with it. She had never married and sometimes felt she had missed a good deal – not having children through which to pass on her values and visions.

She made a few notes about what she had found, placed a sign in the window that read, simply, 'OUT', and went in search of Cal. She found him coming out of the bank where he had been inquiring if they had been expecting to receive anything from the stagecoaches' strongbox. They were not, which was fortunate since it had been taken.

Cal was tall, well over six feet. He had broad shoulders and a slender waist. His facial features were angular – generally good looking for a man in his forties. He had a ready smile and always good words for those he passed. He was a man of good manners, tipping his hat to the women and shaking the hands of the men. And then there was that other thing, of course; he had the fastest draw in the state – *that*,

nobody on either side of the law would dispute.

Cilla approached him and shared what she had learned. Although it helped, it didn't answer Cal's two main questions: Where was he headed and who needed to be notified of his whereabouts?

"I guess we'll have to wait and get the kid's story," Cal said.

"The boy has a name, Cal. It's Johnny, *not* kid."

"Yes ma'am. *Johnny* from now on."

She made her way back toward her office and climbed the wooden steps to Doc's place upstairs. She knocked and without pausing opened the door and went on in.

"Doc? Cilla!

Doc appeared from his bedroom drying his hands on a towel. He had shed his suit coat and untied his bow tie.

"I hear you have a pretty messed up youngster in here," she said.

"That I do. Nip and tuck. Seems like a strong lad, though. He's had good nutrition – strong nails, shiny hair, well-muscled."

"It might help to know his name is Johnny Baker. An only child. From Kansas City. Just lost his parents in a house fire. Comes from an educated family and brought a virtual library with him – I suppose he didn't think we had books out here in the wild west."

"You've been snooping through his things, I take it," Doc said.

"Snooping is what we newspaper types do; besides, I was just carrying out the Marshal's orders. Still don't know where the boy's headed."

"I think I can tell you that. The stage ticket was in his back pants pocket. He was on his way here to Red Bend. Darndest thing, he was wearing two belts – one through the loops in his trousers and one just cinched up around his waist. Is that some new trend among the young folks?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Just a regular old belt?"

"Come on in and take a look – at him and the belt, I suppose. His fever is already setting in. I'm afraid there will be one whale of an infection."

"That's the main reason I'm here. I can handle the wet

wash cloths. I slept last month.”

Doc met her attempt at humor with a quick smile.

“I thank you for coming. As you see, I’m keeping both his head and his entire torso covered in wet towels. They grow warm in a hurry. It’ll be a long night. There’s the extra belt on the back of the chair, by the way.”

Cilla picked it up. It was a wide, dull finish, black belt with a heavy iron buckle. It was adorned with fancy, white, stitching along both edges and had been hand stamped with various designs.

“It’s certainly not new,” she said. “Maybe something his parents handed down to him recently and he just wanted to keep it close – some sort of heirloom with sentimental value. He just turned thirteen.”

“That would have been my educated guess, but how did you know before you even saw him?”

“One of the books in his trunk is a new Thesaurus and inside the front cover was written something like, “Happy thirteenth. Remember us when you’re a famous writer,” and it was signed, Winston and April Pettigrew – he was Johnny’s father’s boss at a newspaper.”

Johnny groaned and began tossing his head back and forth. A distressed look washed across his face – more upset than pained. It was the look that usually signaled tears of sorrow would soon follow. He mumbled, but with some emotion. It sounded like, “You’ve been hit, Mr. Dupree. Stay down! Mr. Dupree! Mr. Dupree!”

As quickly as it had come, it left and he was again quiet, limp, and hot. There was no color in his cheeks. His lips were parched and soon to crack.

“We need to see if he can swallow,” Doc said. “He needs to build up his fluid reserve. Every sip will help. You see to that while I bring fresh water for the towels. Let’s prop him up a bit on some pillows, first, so he won’t gag.”

## **CHAPTER TWO: Doc Meet Johnny. Johnny Meet Doc.**

Johnny had blond hair and blue eyes. His shoulders had already broadened into those of a young teen. He was slender and above average height for his age. Cilla was sure the girls found him quite handsome – heck, *Cilla* found him quite handsome.

She kept his hair wet and wrung out and rewet the towels frequently. The sheet and mattress below him were soaked – not a bad thing considering his condition. From time to time he moaned and his face took on a pained expression. He was still taking shallow breaths that came far too infrequently for Cilla’s comfort. She could feel his heart continue to race in his chest. She held his hand hoping that might provide him some sense of security and belonging.

The bullet had entered his body at about eight o’clock on the morning of May first. Cilla had begun her vigil at ten thirty. The clock had completed one full turn since then – it was ten thirty that night. He had not opened his eyes. Doc entered the bedroom with a cup of broth.

“You go home now, Cilla. I got it for the night. Could use your help again in the morning. Thanks.”

Cilla understood it had not merely been a suggestion. She stood, leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on Johnny’s forehead. The hint of a smile turned the corners of his mouth. She left.

Doc sat beside the bed and began coaxing the broth into the boy’s mouth and down his throat. He needed food for strength. It took an hour but he swallowed every drop.

Doc gently wiped Johnny's lips and chin and once again replaced the towels. As he smoothed the towel against the boy's chest, Johnny's left arm moved and his hand met Doc's hand. The two hands lay there together for some time, Doc's on the boy's chest and Johnny's on the back of Doc's hand.

Presently, Johnny's hand offered a series of weak pats. His eyes fluttered and eventually opened in the nearly darkened room, lit only by one lamp burning low on the table beside the bed.

He struggled to focus his eyes. When Doc's two gentle, friendly faces finally merged into one, Johnny offered a faint smile. Doc returned it with a nod and one of his own.

"You're not Dupree?" Johnny said a question in his tone.

"No. I'm Doc. You were hurt. You're here in my office getting better. You need to rest."

"Are the horses okay? I couldn't control them."

"They're fine. They're resting in the corral. Now you need to rest, too."

"Where's Aunt Mae?"

"Aunt Mae?" Doc asked, knowing he really shouldn't be encouraging conversation.

"Mae Madigan – my aunt. Is this Red Bend?"

"Yes, this is Red Bend. Your aunt is resting now. She'll be to see you in the morning. You need to sleep now."

Johnny managed a faint nod and closed his eyes.

"Thanks, Doc. Someday I'll take care of you."

He was immediately asleep. Doc smiled. The short exchange had given him a wealth of information about the boy. He was an unselfish and caring person – more concerned about Dupree, the horses and his aunt than himself. He wasn't one to take charity – he'd take care of Doc sometime, to repay the favor. He was well mannered – having thanked him.

Doc went to the front window and lit the lantern hanging there. It was his long-established signal telling the Marshal he needed him.

A few minutes later Cal came through the door.

"Doc? Cal! What's up?"



He entered the bedroom.

“The boy came to for a moment. Mae Madigan is his aunt – great aunt I imagine. She is who he’s coming to.”

“That should make an interesting mix,” Cal said – a seventy-year-old, old maid and a newly teened boy. I’ll send my deputy out to fetch her in a buggy. He spoke, you say.”

“Not a single question about himself. No indication of pain. Just worried about a Mr. Dupree, his aunt, and the horses.”

Cal flashed his wonderful smile and nodded.

Mae Madigan lived a half mile north of town in the shadow of the high, red rock hills that marked the northern edge of the flat plain on which Red Bend sat. They were a boy’s paradise with high ground to climb, shallow caves to explore, pooled areas in streams for swimming, and long forgotten mining cabins to use as refuge in pretend battles with outlaws. Doc wondered just how a city boy would take to all that – well, he wondered how a city boy would take to rural Kansas at any level. Cilla had mentioned his wardrobe of fancy duds.

As the night went on, Doc napped as he could – a well-practiced state of affairs for a man in his line of work.

At eight the following morning several fascinating things took place there in Doc’s office. There was a gentle knock at his outside door.

“Hey, Doc. Somebody at the door,” came Johnny’s remarkably strong voice, rousing Doc from a deeper sleep than he usually allowed himself on such occasions.

“Son? You’re awake. You should have awakened me.”

“I figured you needed your sleep. Thanks, by the way. I doubt if I told you before.”

Doc moved to feel the boy’s forehead.

“Your fever has broken. Darndest thing ever. You must have the constitution of a horse.”

“Sorry if I disappointed you. I’m hardly ever sick and always bounce back really fast. Runs in my family. Dad is – well was – the same way.”

Johnny sighed a deep sigh as the reality of his new life began setting in.

The deputy and Mae crossed the outer office and

stopped in the doorway of the bedroom. She and Johnny had never met although he had seen pictures of her as a younger woman.

“You have to be my Aunt Mae,” he said. “I’d know that wonderful face anywhere.”

She immediately began to cry. He had already learned that women cried a lot.

“Hey, I’m just fine, thanks to Doc here and you and I are going to be just fine, too. You just wait and see.”

He tried to lift his head and immediately found that he couldn’t.

“Guess I’m still a bit weak, Doc.”

“About four pints weak, I’m thinking, Doc said. “You lost a lot of blood.”

“Oh, that’s right I got shot. Ouch!”

He moved his left arm to feel the bandage. Doc poured a thick black liquid into a spoon and held it to Johnny’s mouth.

“This will dull the pain. Don’t expect it to go away because it won’t, but this should help make it more tolerable.”

Johnny opened his mouth, plainly ready for any little relief he could come by. His eyes momentarily teared. Whether that was from the sudden realization of the pain or the traditionally terrible taste of liquid medicine was not evident to the others.

“The boy needs his rest now. Cilla will arrange for you a room at the hotel until we can get all this straightened out,” Doc said looking at Mae. “Come back at noon. You can visit again for a few minutes then.”

“Mae stepped to the bed and bent down placing a kiss on Johnny’s forehead. He reached up and touched her cheek.

“Just as soft as they looked to be in the pictures Mom has – had.”

Doc shoed them out of the room with his hands and spoke with them in low tones in the other room. Johnny understood there were probably things he wasn’t being told. He would find out. Johnny *a/ways* found out what he wanted to find out.

Over the following two days Johnny improved rapidly and was soon sitting up in a chair for several hours at a time. He read a lot and wrote some, trying to recall the robbery and

describe exactly how things had happened. He was fascinated by how difficult it was for a right hander to write with his left hand.

Mr. Dupree – the marshal determined his first name was Jacques – was originally from France and had settled in New Orleans years before. He apparently made his living as a gambler. Things in his bag suggested he had recently ridden river boats up the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers to Kansas City where he boarded the stagecoach west. Interesting to Johnny was the fact that his ticket was also for Red Bend although he told him he was headed for Dodge City a good hundred miles on to the south west.

When Dupree was hit in the chest at the open door of the coach he removed his belt and handed it to Johnny. His last words were something odd; “This will surely take much better care of you than it has me.” He fired the last three bullets from his revolver and fell through the door onto the dry, dusty ground.

Johnny remembered that he had just cinched up the belt around his waist when he, himself, was hit. He examined the markings on the belt.

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He knew a little French and it wasn't French. He had studied some of the Indian symbols and figured that's what they might be – although they didn't use letters and numbers. He'd ask Doc or the Marshal later. In the meantime he wondered: a circle with an R in the center – could represent the Circle R ranch, maybe; there was a series of Vs or upside down Vs with a small x set into them at the bottom; a symbol that was hard to name – like a backwards L laying on its side; two figures shaped perhaps like the points of arrows – at least they pointed to the right; the number 22; and a disk of commas, which could maybe represent the sun or the disk on a spur.

Of course, he wasn't even sure they meant anything – perhaps just a design some leather worker liked – although it would be hard to classify it as attractive or even artistically interesting.

He and Dupree had traveled together for four days and had just begun the fifth when the robbery occurred. Across

the generally flat plains of Kansas a coach could make sixty miles a day. Red Bend was about 250 miles west and a bit south from Kansas City. During that time the two of them had become well acquainted. Dupree had taught him how to play a variety of card games and had told about his own boyhood days in France and his ocean voyage at 18 from Liverpool England to New York City on the steamship, Baltic. Johnny remembered his accent and the smell of perfume, commonly worn by men of the European upper class.

He would lay the belt aside for a time, but would be drawn back to it. Why did Dupree say the belt would take care of him? How could a belt take care of anybody – keep their pants from falling down around their ankles, perhaps, but the man's tone had suggested something far more important.

He said he was headed to Dodge City to play in a high stakes poker game and yet no money was found among his belongings. He hadn't seemed like the kind to lie – not to kids anyway – so Johnny wondered why his stage ticket had been to Red Bend – maybe a stopover for some reason. See relatives, maybe. There had to be some reasonable answer. And, why, when Johnny said he was going to Red Bend would Dupree not say that was also his destination? It just didn't make sense.

An idea came to him. Dupree knew he (Johnny) was going to Red Bend. Once he realized he was dying, he handed over the belt to him – he who the man knew was going to Red Bend. Johnny became convinced there was some connection between the belt and Red Bend. He had thought of himself as a detective all his life. He'd figure it out, *but* probably not until he could dress himself and walk up and down stairs.

\* \* \*

It was a full week later when Doc pronounced Johnny fit enough to leave his office and start his new life with his Aunt Mae. She came to pick him up in her one seat buggy – black, wooden wheels, seat set on springs, a short open space in back for transporting supplies. That day it held Johnny's trunk. Doc gave him strict orders not to try to unload the trunk by himself or lift anything heavy for at least a month. Johnny

tended to be impatient so he redefined 'month' as 'three hours' and before they reached his Aunts place had figured how to get the trunk inside.

The house sat atop on a low rise. It was a small one story, white house with a sitting room, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. It had a wide porch across the front holding a small table and several chairs. There were plants in flower pots hanging around the outside edge of the porch from the ceiling. The well was in the front yard only feet from the porch. The outhouse was out back as was a small barn apparently shared by the horse and a number of chickens.

A sizable garden was growing on the east side of the house. The plants looked wilted under the noon day sun.

It was nothing like his eight-room house in Kansas City, with two floors, carpets on the floor, gas lights and indoor plumbing with a bathtub fitted out with a gas burning hot water heater. Saturday night baths in a big steel tub was going to be a new experience for him. He'd manage. Johnny always managed.

Mae had driven the rig from town. Johnny helped her down and suggested that if she would allow it, he would like to back the buggy up to the front porch so the trunk could be slid off onto it.

She nodded her approval.

"But only if you watch yourself like Doc said. Can't have you tearing up the inside of your chest now that's it's finally on the mend."

She stood on the porch and watched, fully impressed by how he handled the horse and buggy. With the buggy in place his first act was to go the horse and pat its face offering words of thanks for how well she had done her part. Since Molly – the horse – had become Mae's best friend over the years, she appreciated the boy's effort.

The porch was two feet off the ground on a stone foundation, built in the fashion of the day. The rear of the buggy was no more than three feet from the ground. Johnny positioned himself behind the trunk and shoved it forward with his feet and legs, his back against the rear of the seat. With what appeared to Mae was very little effort, the trunk was soon on the porch.

With her helping, they moved it back against the outside wall.

“Let me tend to Molly,” Mae said. “You go take a seat. Then I’ll give you the grand tour and show you your room.”

Johnny’s instincts were to offer to care for the horse, but it seemed important to her to do that, so he nodded and took a seat. He had to admit the process of moving the trunk had taken a lot out of him and he appreciated the rest. He also admired how strong his aging aunt was.

Mae was soon back and led him inside. It was a pleasant home she had there. There was a large round braided rug spreading almost wall to wall in the twelve-foot square sitting room. It held a settee (sofa), an overstuffed chair and a book shelf. The fireplace was on the interior wall, to the left, which was shared with the two bedrooms. The kitchen was to the rear. There was a cook stove, a small table with four chairs, several stand-alone cabinets and a sink – no running water, but it was plumbed with a drain into the back yard.

The bedroom that was to be his was entered through a narrow door in the kitchen. It was small, no more than eight feet wide and ten long. It had a window on the back wall. The stones from the fireplace formed the wall to the left of the door into the room. The warmth from the fire would heat the stones and provide some heat into his room during the cold months. He assumed it was the same arrangement into the front room. The ‘door’ was a heavy, dark green drape. So much for any real privacy.

It was a single bed with rope springs and a straw filled mattress. He’d get used to it. Johnny never had difficulty sleeping. There was a dresser with four drawers and an open closet for hanging clothes. Again, there was a small oval braided rug on the floor between his bed and the closet.

Johnny believed it was not for him to judge it as being good or bad. It was to be his and he was appreciative of having a place. He had not let himself think about how it would be for fear he would be disappointed. He knew it would take some time for him and his aunt to come to a working relationship. He didn’t know her expectations of him and he had no idea what to expect of her. He expected to work

around the place – the garden for one. He was pleasantly surprised that she had a sizable bookcase loaded with books. He was eager to look them over.

Her place was really not very far from town – no more than a five or six-minute trot he figured once he got back into trotting shape. He had made good friends in Doc, Cilla, and the Marshal. He was sure there would be kids in his life eventually – hopefully a girl or two. He was disappointed there was no high school for him and he had mentioned it to Doc. He planned to finish high school and eventually find some way to attend college. He wanted to become a writer of things that would be important to people all over the world. Johnny was not one to think small!

For the first time since he woke up looking into Doc's interesting face, he was hungry. He imagined Doc would say that was a good thing. Perhaps Aunt Mae was a mind reader. Perhaps she merely knew more about boys his age than he thought she would.

"You getting your appetite back, yet? Doc said to stuff your risibles anytime you look the least bit hungry. He figured you lost ten pounds through your ordeal."

"Risibles? I wasn't aware I had risibles."

He offered his wonderful full smile.

"It was my mother's word for any internal organ she thought needed to be there."

"In that case – and thanks to your mother – my risibles could definitely use some sustenance."

"Sustenance? Am I going to need a dictionary to live beside you?"

"I get the idea your vocabulary can hold its own with most anybody."

She raised her eyebrows.

"I'm a pretty good cook," Johnny said. "Mom always said so. Let me help when I can. I want to do my part around here, you understand."

"I'm sure we will get all that worked out in time. You must understand that I've lived alone for fifty-five years so I'm pretty set in my ways."

"I've always been very good at adjusting to new situations. I really doubt if we'll come to blows over anything."

She looked the boy in his face and tears came into her eyes.

“I really am glad you are here with me, Johnny. I don’t pretend to know how to raise a boy your age, but I figure together we’ll get that figured out, too. Can you be alright with that?”

“Yes. I can be very alright with that. Now about my starving risibles.”

They shared their first laugh. They shared their first embrace. Johnny told himself things were going to be fine.



### CHAPTER THREE: Settling In

A week later, Johnny went for a checkup. Mae took him in the buggy although he had wanted to walk. She used the excuse she needed to pick up a few things in town.

While she entered the general store, Johnny crossed the street to the newspaper office. He had grown to like Cilla during his stay at Docs.

"How's my favorite newspaper owner/person/woman. Not sure what you are so I'm not sure what to call you."

"All those, I suppose. I'm suddenly doing better seeing you up and around. Still weak I imagine."

"A little, but I'm coming along pretty well. My right shoulder is stiff. Hope Doc gives his permission for me to begin exercising it. A right hander needs his right shoulder. Any good stories you're working on?"

"Depends on which side of the story you find yourself, I suppose. A few weeks ago, I started a series on prominent families in this area of the state – ranchers, politicians, successful businessmen. I'm finding a few things some of they aren't too happy about having told. The next few months should be interesting."

"Similar to stirring up a hornets nest, you say?"

"An apt analogy."

She looked at him as if to ask if he understood those words. He nodded and replied.

"Apt, *fitting* – Analogy, *comparison*."

"I figured you'd know or I wouldn't have used them. Can't use quarter words a whole lot in a community that's

mostly into nickel words.”

Again, he smiled and nodded, and said what he had really come to say.

“I never thanked you for all your help when I was at Doc’s. I really appreciated the time you spent with me. I like talking about important things like we did. Aunt Mae is a fine person, but she’s really not into the things I think are important.”

“Different generations are into different things.”

“I guess. Well, anyway, I wanted to say thanks. Here, I brought you a story I wrote. Forgive the penmanship – left handed.”

He removed a folded piece of paper from his rear trousers pocket and smoothed it out against the table.

“You said you’d like to read some of what I write.”

“Yes. Thank you. I will read it with my tea later on.”

“Gotta get up to Doc’s. I can’t get used to these informal ways. In Kansas City if you had a doctor’s appointment it would be set to the minute. Here, Doc says, ‘Drop by sometime in the morning.’ I like it this way but it will take some getting used to.”

He left and walked around the side of the building to the outside stairs. He was beginning to realize his wasn’t a strong as he thought he was. Suddenly the steps looked very high, very long and very steep.

“One step at a time,” he told himself.

He was soon at the top. In the fashion he had observed from others, he knocked and then went right on inside.

“Doc! Johnny, here for my anytime Monday morning appointment.”

There was a note on the exam table.

*“Johnny. Had to go deliver a baby. Should be back by mid-morning. Make yourself at home. Library is in my bedroom, but then you know that.”*

Doc Weber’s office was compact and efficient. It consisted of two rooms across the front of the second floor. The only entrance was on the west side at the top of the stairs. The first room doubled as waiting room and examination room – there was a wide folding screen that was

spread when privacy was needed. Five wooden, straight-backed chairs were lined up to the right of the door against the outside wall.

The second room was his bedroom and living area. You crossed the first to get to get to it. It held two beds, two good sized sitting chairs, and a desk. Across the front wall, on both sides of the window, were four, floor to ceiling book cases. Only one contained medical books. The rest ran the gamut from science and geography and history, to novels by the great writers. Doc had wide interests.

When Doc returned, he found Johnny sound asleep in one of his big chairs, a book about Indian history on his lap. Without awakening him, Doc began talking as he washed up and put on a fresh shirt. Apparently, he had been gone all night.

“It was a healthy specimen of a baby boy, Johnny. That made his pappy happy. There are four older sisters. His arrival should bring quite a change to that household.”

It had been a nice way to wake up – listening to the low mellow tones of Docs gentle voice.

“Glad it’s healthy. You out all night?”

“It’s an hour’s ride out to the Duggan’s farm. On the way back I just set Jessie in the direction of town and slept in the buggy.”

“Jessie’s your horse, I assume. That’s your way of saying you weren’t *really* up all night?”

“Well, I wasn’t, weren’t you listening?”

It had been delivered with a smile.

“Come out to the table and let me see you get yourself out of that shirt.”

Johnny had developed a system – left arm out first then he just pulled it off down the right arm without really having to engage it in the process.

“Interesting. You plan to go through life not using your right arm?”

“Oh, no, sir. Just didn’t want to damage anything. Here, I’ll put it back on and try the right arm first.”

“Not necessary. Just an old doctor’s way of saying it’s time to begin easing into using it again.”

“Great to hear. You need to make sure my Aunt Mae

knows that. She's being *very* protective of me. She's always hovering around to help. I love her dearly, but she's driving me batty."

Doc snorted and smiled.

"I'll make a point of speaking with her before you leave town."

He removed the bandage, looked over the area around the wound, poking here and there, watching Johnny's face for indications of pain. He put on a new dressing as they continued to talk.

"Be good as new by this time next month," was Doc's final pronouncement. "It'll be ready to snuggle with some lucky young lady."

Johnny blushed.

"I'm not experienced in the snuggling side of life, yet. Willing, mind you, just not been there yet."

"Plenty of time for that, although I should forewarn you that the girls in these parts are not bashful about making their wants known."

Johnny nodded, really having no idea what 'wants' Doc was talking about. He opted to return to the previous topic.

"Next month? That seems like a long time away," Johnny said.

"You just count your blessings that you're still around to wait a month. You came within a gnat's eyelash of going to meet your maker, young man."

"I tend to forget that – or, perhaps I *choose* to forget that. Way too early in life to think about dying."

"That it is. That it is. I figured you'd be wearing that fancy new belt."

"It's too long. I need to add a new hole and haven't been able to do that without the use of both arms. You had any ideas what those symbols might mean?"

"No, and I *have* been thinking about them. I'm always a sucker for a mystery."

"Me too. Ever since I was a kid."

Doc chuckled at the 'kid' reference.

"Have you asked Cilla? She knows a great deal about symbols and such – especially if it has to do with ranching or Indian life."

“Not really. She knows about it and did show some interest, I guess. I’ll have to get back to her about it. You folks have all been so nice to me. It’s more than I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“I really had no idea. I’m starting a new life, you know. I spent the past month just being terrified about things – how the people would be out here and such. I’ve read books about Buffalo Bill and the like and I guess I figured I’d arrive to a bunch of guys wearing buckskins and shooting at each other with buffalo guns.”

“There are a few like that still around. They drift in and out of town. Nothing to be concerned about. Back to the belt. Did Mr. Dupree give you any idea why it was so important that he wanted somebody else – you – to have it?”

“No. There really wasn’t time to talk about it. In fact, I hadn’t even noticed it before. He wore a long dress coat and it was hidden underneath.”

Doc nodded. Johnny went on.

“It’s bound to hold some significance. He treated it like it was a very valuable possession – and not just something that had sentimental value. I’ve decided it has to have something to do with Red Bend. Do you suppose that’s what the R stands for inside the first Circle – Red Bend? The circle could symbolize the town, I guess.”

“Or the Bend – a circle is one continuous bend.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Fascinating. Maybe even both.”

“You need more elixir for the pain?” Doc asked.

“No. I really haven’t taken any since that first night in my new bed at Aunt Mae’s. That does remind me, though. I need to receive your bill for services so I can plan a way to pay you. I’m a good worker and very dependable. You’ll have to be patient, but I’ll take care of it.”

“Don’t you remember the deal you made with me about that?”

“Deal? No!”

“You said that since I was taking care of you, someday you would take care of me. You *are* good to your word, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes, but . . .”

“No buts. I figure a deal between men is a deal, period.”

“Thank you. And you can count on me. Any time. Day or night. You need something, anything, just ask.”

“It seems we have an understanding. Now, put your shirt on and scoot. I need forty winks before the Astor twins arrive for their two-month checkup.”

Johnny was soon back down the steps and onto the plank sidewalk that encircled Main Street. He felt somehow better – more secure, more grown up, more mature – after that talk with Doc. He and Doc had sealed a man to man arrangement. He understood how he was to handle the repayment of the fee. He had found a common interest with the old gentleman – solving mysteries. He even felt like he had Doc’s permission if not his urging to begin thinking about girls in ways he’d been wary of before. It had been a good talk.

He stopped back at Cilla’s.

“Remember that belt we talked about some before?”

“I sure do. I meant to mention it earlier. I’ve been thinking about it.”

“So have Doc and I. Any ideas?”

“I don’t remember the entire sequence of figures.”

“I can draw them out for you.”

She slid a piece of paper and a pen across the table that functioned as her combination work area and front counter where she received the public for whatever reason. He drew the symbols with great care and handed it back. ®

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He had some initial comments.

“Doc and I are thinking the ‘R’ inside the circle may be a reference to Red Bend. Doc pointed out a circle is really one continuous bend. I had been wondering if it might be a branding mark used by a local ranch.”

“I’m not aware of a Circle R ranch anywhere close. I do have to wonder why whoever it was wouldn’t have just used the obvious RB to represent the town.”

“It seems to me that ‘obvious’ is exactly what the creator of the symbols *didn’t* want.”

“A good observation, of course. I can tell you that

Indians used the inverted 'V' in two main ways. The plains Indians used them to represent Tepees or settlements. Those that lived in rougher terrain used them to represent mountains or hills."

Johnny nodded with interest. She went on.

"I'm wondering about the 22 and the x – Indians would not have used numerals or the letter 'x'."

"I was just reading in one of Doc's books that 'x' is a universal mark meaning 'here' or 'this is the place'. In such cases, it's not an alphabetic symbol at all. More just a form of a cross or crosshair."

"You're right about that. I'm thinking if the 'x' is a location, then the V's don't represent something temporary like a tent – more likely hills or mountains – something permanent."

"If's that's true, it looks to me like there are *four* hills represented there. What do you think? The symbol in the center that's separated by the 'x' is open at the top."

"I don't know," she said thinking. "Could it mean the hills are separated by a gorge or by some distance – there above where the 'x' sits?"

"I hadn't considered that. Good input. Anything come to mind about that odd 'L' shaped form?"

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"Nada. A turn, perhaps. It seems to represent some sort of angle. The arrows seem pretty self-evident – pointing to the right."

"Probably," Johnny said, "but I was wondering if they might be the insignia of a corporal. Doesn't it look like that?"

"Interesting. Yes, it does. I guess it may not have been as self-evident as I thought."

"Whatever they represent they are pointing to the right of the angle, which is to the right of the first two hills."

"What you describe is there, alright", Cilla said agreeing. "Could be a quantity of something – number of items in a group, feet or yards or miles, something like an identification number or a registration number, perhaps a year – 1822?"

"May be how far apart the hills are there at the 'x' – like an answer to the question you posed about distance."

Cilla nodded, more and more impressed by the young man's ability to think things through.

Johnny went on.

"That leaves the sun symbol on the far right – which may mean something entirely different from that, I understand."

"It might mean sparkly or bright or a reflection or an indistinct or imperfect circle," she said.

"Lots we don't understand, I guess," Johnny said.

"I think the clue to unlocking it rests in those 'Vs'. They might represent something very different from what I've suggested. I have no idea what that might be."

"If we assume the 'x' is the cross that designates a place, then the point of the code seems to be to locate that place – right?" Johnny asked.

"That would seem right," Cilla agreed. "The Dupree guy gave you no idea about any of it, correct?"

"Correct. I've been thinking about that a lot. He talked about being French and a professional gambler from New Orleans. He gambled his way north on passenger boats on the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. I think it's odd that he had no money on him if he'd been any good as a gambler."

"That is interesting. Cal confirmed that. When he rode out with the undertaker to collect the bodies from the site of the robbery, he went through Dupree's clothing and all the money he had on him was three dollars in his wallet. The coach fare from Kansas City to Red Bend would have been something in the neighborhood of five dollars – about two cents a mile."

"That's accurate. My ticket cost four dollars and eighty-eight cents."

"Three dollars would have got him room and board here for a week or two, with just enough left over for stage fare down to Dodge City. That's where you said he was headed, right? He would have certainly been expecting to improve his financial condition in a hurry once he arrived here, or he'd have no stake for a big game. That could amount to several hundred dollars – perhaps thousands, even."

"So, the belt very likely has to do with money or something he could easily turn into money, you're saying."



“It’s suddenly getting very interesting, isn’t it, Johnny?”

“I’ll say! Exciting! Like a treasure hunt, maybe. What a story that could make.”

“I read your story while you were upstairs – couldn’t wait ‘til tea. You have a real talent. I took the liberty of writing a few comments and suggestions on it – hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. I seek suggestions and comments. Father always said the best way to learn how to write was to write and write and write and have people whose opinion you respect comment on it.”

“Your Father was a wise man. Young writers have to be open for suggestions. Too many take suggestions about their writing as criticism of them as people. They have to learn how to think, ‘thank you’ instead of ‘put down’ when somebody makes comments they may not like.”

“You’ll find I really like myself so I’m not given to being offended. Mom said my worth as a person came from knowing my honest heart and not from what other people thought of me.”

“A second wise parent. You have been fortunate to have had the good fortune to start your life with them.”

“I have to remember that, when I feel sad about losing them. What you’re saying is I already carry a part of them with me.”

“And the two wise parents raised a wise son,” Cilla said, another of those fully inexplicable (unexplainable) female tears forming at the corner of her eye.

“It’s none of my business, of course, but do you know if you’re alright financially,” she asked. “I shouldn’t have asked. Forget it, please.”

“It’s a reasonable concern from a friend and you’re one of my four best friends here in my new life. Father’s lawyer said I’ll be fine for money. He set up a trust fund that will deposit money into a bank account every month to cover Aunt Mae’s extra expenses because of me. He said I will need to earn my own spending money. Father wanted me to learn the value of work and I think that was a good plan. There is other money set aside for college when that time comes. Right now, I’m really more concerned about getting a high school

education here in Red Bend than I am about money.”

“I’m glad to know that you and Mae are taken care of that way. You know all of that will just stay with me. About high school, let Doc and me get our heads together on that. I’m sure it can be worked out.”

“Really? That’s great. Thanks. I can earn money for books.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I’ll talk with him later.”

“Well, if you’ll hand me the story back, I better be on my way to find Aunt Mae before she buys lace curtains for my bedroom.”

They exchanged knowing smiles. Johnny would have been surprised if Cilla had lace curtains in her bedroom.

All in all, it had been a very good morning. His chest swelled with confidence and new feelings of security. He was well on his way toward feeling like Red Bend could come to feel like home – someday. He felt a new spring in his step as he made his way back across the dusty street to track down his Aunt.

He passed three girls about his age who were standing in front of the dry goods store. He tipped his hat – one Cilla had provided along with the wardrobe to replace his way-too-citified clothes. They smiled and tittered among themselves. Although he considered saying something his tongue stopped working so rather than embarrass himself, he decided against it.

He *would* remember the blond girl’s smile, however. It seemed somehow special.

On the way *home* – his aunt had made it clear he was to stop referring to it as ‘her’ place and start calling it ‘their’ place – he asked if he could handle the horse (drive). She allowed it with a nod although seemed somewhat reluctant. That was more because she had always tended to her own needs and it would take some doing to begin allowing another person to assist her.

By the time they pulled to a stop at the front porch, she was feeling better about it and had enjoyed the ride, being able to just look at the scenery for a change. Johnny was clearly quite capable with the reins. He helped her down and

carried the packages inside, then returned to tend to the horse and buggy back at the barn. Mae thought she just might learn to like having a man around the place.

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The term *Indian* is used in this story because in 1880 the current term, *Native American*, had not yet been coined. No disrespect is intended.

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## **CHAPTER FOUR: Johnny Gets Belted!**

During the next several weeks, things began moving fast on several fronts. Doc, Cilla, and one of the teachers at the school – one with two years of college – put together a course of study for Johnny. They gathered books from several places and the plan was set in motion. Come September, he would spend two days a week at school, and the rest of the time he would work on his own with help from Doc and Cilla as he felt he needed it. That gave some leeway in getting a job.

At home, he had arranged a series of pipes to take water from the pump out front to shallow trenches he had dug between the rows of vegetables in the garden. With the extra water, they grew into large, robust plants. It would be a good harvest. He was working on a plan to get water run into the kitchen for his aunt, but hadn't worked out all the details yet. He hadn't mentioned that.

Through the church – Aunt Mae insisted on Sunday morning attendance – he had begun to meet other youngsters around his age. The blond girl with the memorable smile was Clarabelle – Clair for short. Her father was the blacksmith – the two hundred and fifty pound, six foot three, bulging arm muscles, blacksmith. Johnny would make certain he treated Clair right – if he ever got up to nerve to ask her if they could spend time together.

Many of the young people got married at sixteen or seventeen. That was NOT the path to adulthood he wanted and he would make that very clear to Clair if he ever got up

the courage to . . . well, you get the picture.

One day while he was tramping the area behind the house for no reason other than to be tramping the area behind the house, he stopped to look over the hills that bordered their house to the rear (north). *There they were* – the four hills on his belt. There were two to the west and two to the east with a wide area of tall rocky outcroppings between them.

He smiled to himself saying out loud: “Now if I can only find that ‘x’.”

He trotted the hundred yards to the base of the hills. Although they were really hills, they were locally called the Red Mountains. He was most interested in the area between the hills. It was rugged terrain with lots of rocks varying from the size of a soft ball to a few that stood fifty feet or more high. He took some time to get acquainted with the area.

Nothing else from the symbols on the belt stood out to him. Rocks were rocks not lopsided ‘Ls’ or arrows or 22’s or sunny circles. Earlier he had wondered if that ‘sun’ might have been a carving on a rock. If it were, he had missed it. All he saw were hundreds and hundreds of fully uninteresting red rocks. He returned to the house.

He had a book to return to Doc and told his Aunt Mae he was going to trot into town and exchange it for another. She was gradually getting comfortable with Johnny being out of her sight – clearly Doc had had that talk with her. She understood he could be trusted and was relatively careful as boys his age went.

It was mid-morning. The sun had not yet become unbearably hot. The blazing summer sun in Kansas was just that - HOT. He was back to being able to run as fast as he wanted to without causing pain in his chest. He took that as a sign he had healed.

When he hit Main Street, he slowed and settled into a leisurely walk. He liked to speak to the folks he passed and they seemed happy to chat with him as well. It was a nice difference from the city – out their people always had time for each other. Many of the women still gave him that ‘poor little orphan boy’ look, but he figured the better they got to know him the sooner that would disappear.

He was passing the Undertaker’s establishment when a

well-dressed man – one he had never seen before – approached him.

“Nice belt, son. What’ll you take for it?”

The man spoke with some sort of accent.

“Thanks, but it’s not for sale.”

“I’ll give you a dollar.”

A dollar was a *lot* of money, but he didn’t give it a second thought.

“No, sir. It has sentimental value and is not for sale.”

“I’ll go as high as two,” the man said.

That was a week’s wages for a man in Red Bend. Something was definitely wrong – no cowpoke had that kind of money to spend on anything, let alone a kid’s belt. Johnny was more than a little suspicious of the man’s intentions.

“Two, you say. Well, I wouldn’t want to have that kind of money on me out here on the street. Let’s go over to the bank and make the trade there.”

Johnny hitched head and began walking toward the bank. The man followed. They would have to pass the Marshal’s office on the way. Once in front of it, Johnny darted off the street, jumped up onto the raised plank walk and was inside the office.

“Marshal, there’s a man out there that wants my belt in the worst way. He offered me two dollars for it. I’m sure he’s up to no good.”

Cal had been sitting behind his desk just in front of the row of cells across the back. He hurried to his feet, put on his hat and was immediately out the front door with Johnny at his heels.

“That’s him getting on that spotted horse – a pinto, I believe is what it’s called in these parts.”

The man kneed his mount and headed out of town at a full gallop clearly not wanting to have to answer any questions from the Marshal.

“Tell me what happened exactly,” the Marshal said.

Johnny related the encounter word by word and gesture by gesture.

“I knew something was up as soon as he expressed interest in my belt. Men just don’t comment on kid’s belts.”

“You’re right there. The belt from the Dupree guy? Doc

mentioned something about it – like some secret code on it, is that the story?”

“Something like that. We’re not sure, but I think I’m getting closer to figuring it out. Cilla is helping me. I came to town to talk with her and Doc about some things I found this morning.”

“Does Mae have a gun out at your place?”

“Two: a repeater rifle and a double-barreled shotgun.”

“You have any experience with firearms, son.”

“Never even touched one I’m afraid. Interested, though.”

“Remind me later on, and me and you will get you some shootin’ lessons. In the meantime, I think you need to leave that belt with me. It’ll be safe here in my office. Could you recognize the man from a picture?”

“Sure could.”

“There’s a pile of wanted posters in my lower left desk drawer. Give a shuffle through them and see if he’s there.”

They went back inside. Johnny went through the posters. None of them even faintly resembled the man.

“He was clean shaven, wore a hat like Dupree wore, felt and blocked with a band and silver buckle. He had expensive black boots with silver spurs. Riding trousers, but a dress coat. Looked to be a man of means as I look back on him. Wore a large gold ring. Didn’t catch that at first. Wasn’t expecting it, I suppose – a man wearing a ring. And he spoke with an accent – not as pronounced as Mr. Dupree, but similar. It may have been New Orleans. I’m not familiar with it. Mr. Dupree is the only man from there I’ve ever met.”

Johnny removed his belt and handed it over. Cal looked around the room and then walked into one of the four empty cells toward the back of the large room. He lifted a mattress and laid out the belt flat under it. He closed the cell door and locked it.

“Better there than in a vault and with twenty-four hour armed guards here to boot.”

Johnny thought it had been a very clever move on the Marshal’s part. He understood, however, that even though the belt might be safe, he and Mae probably weren’t.

“You’ll be okay here in town. Tell you what – he



reached into his top drawer – you take this whistle and if you come up against any problems blow he heck out of it. I'll hear it from anywhere in town."

That made it *two* very clever things from the Marshal in less than five minutes. Johnny was impressed.

"Well, it has proved that the belt is really important to somebody for some reason," Johnny said. "That's been *my* contention right along. I guess it's best to have that out in the open. Shall I tell Aunt Mae?"

"If her wellbeing is at risk I think you owe that to her. Here's an idea. You see if Doc will let you stay with him tonight. If you get that set, I'll send a deputy to explain things to Mae and sit the night out there with her. Wouldn't want the man following you home. Did you get the idea he knew you had the belt and was searching for you?"

"No, sir. Just the opposite, really. We almost passed each other on the street and he did a double take and turned to address me. I think he was as surprised to find it as I was with the price he was willing to pay."

"Good thinking, buy the way, Johnny. That was a top a the line maneuver you put on him out there – working your way over here like you did."

"I've always been good at thinking on my feet. More than once I used it to escape a well-deserved pants warming. I'll go work things out with Doc right now. I'll give you the high sign from in front of the Newspaper office if it's alright."

The arrangement was made. Doc clearly liked the idea. He had hoped to get closer to the boy, but he didn't want to interfere with the building of his new relationship with his aunt. And now they had something really important to get to work on – the mystery of Johnny's belt. Now *there* was a story for the boy to write!

They sat in Doc's bed room in the big chairs.

Johnny told of his discovery in the Red Mountains behind their place in the country. He laid out what they still hadn't figured. Doc had a question. Doc always had good questions.

"That man would not have had to purchase your belt if all he were after were the symbols. He could have admired it and you'd have let him look at it and he could have easily

learned the few symbols and he'd have had all that we have. Why was he so determined to get his hands on that belt itself, and not just the symbols?"

"I must admit I hadn't thought about in terms like that. Very good. I guess that's what I pay you the big money for."

They shared a chuckle.

There was a knock at the door out in the other room. It startled Johnny. Still jumpy from the earlier encounter, his heart began beating overtime. The door opened.

"Do there happen to be a couple of hungry men up here?"

It was Cilla with a basket over her arm. She crossed the waiting room. Johnny stood and went to meet her. Putting the words he heard together with the basket he saw, he understood that lunch was being served. She went on to explain.

"Cal told me about the developments. I figured there would be some high-level thinking going on up here and high level thinking always calls for cold fried chicken, slaw and baked beans."

"You do know a lot about high level thinking, Cilla, Johnny said hoping it sounded humorous. "Please join us. We can use your high-level thinker."

He immediately looked at Doc realizing it hadn't been his place to invite someone into Docs home. Doc nodded.

"Any bearer of fried chicken is always welcome within these walls," he said, "even when she tries to disguise her general nosiness in terms of high level thinking."

It was worth another chuckle

Cilla handed out plates and passed the bowls of food. They ate right there in the chairs as they continued to talk. Johnny restated Doc's question about why the man had wanted to possess the belt and not just the series of symbols.

Cilla had a series of short, pointed questions for Johnny.

"The man clean shaven?"

"Yes."

"He had a recent haircut?"

"Yes."

"Fingernails clean?"

“Yes.”

“Jewelry?”

“Yes, an expensive looking ring.”

“Wide tie with a large knot?”

“Yes. You know the guy?”

“He was dressed a lot like the Dupree man, am I right?”

“Well, yes. The riding trousers were different and the man today didn’t wear a vest or smell of perfume, but yes.”

Cilla nodded.

“I’m thinking another gambler – either a colleague of Dupree or a rival at the card table.”

“And he knows something about the belt that we don’t,” Doc added with a series of thoughtful nods.

Doc often nodded instead of giving an outright complement.

“How could he know the belt was here?” Johnny asked.

Cilla provided her thoughts.

“After you somehow managed to get the stage into town, it eventually continued on to Dodge City with a new driver who undoubtedly knew the story and gave the folks down there all the details. There were probably already other gamblers gathered there for the big game. The major gamblers all know each other. New Orleans is a major gambling venue (location). Anybody who knew Dupree well, could have known about the belt and of its importance. Since he died here, this would be the logical place to look for it.”

“You said the man was coming out of the Undertaker’s building when your paths crossed?” Doc asked.

“Right. Ah! I see where you’re going,” Johnny said. “The Pinto Man stopped to see if the undertaker had seen the belt or better yet if he *had* the belt.”

“So, it comes down to something about the *belt* instead of something about the *symbols*?” Johnny said with clear disappointment in his tone.

“It could well be both,” Doc said. “We really need to examine that belt more fully.”

“I’ll go get it,” Johnny said sitting his plate aside.

“Have Cal accompany you back here,” Cilla called after him.

(Women! As if the Marshal would have had it any

other way.)

She turned to Doc.

“You suppose we ever had that much energy?”

“If we did, we certainly should have bottled some for later in life,” Doc said. It wasn’t an original comment with him, but he wasn’t above using someone else’s material when it fit the situation.

Johnny was back with Cal by his side. He had worn the belt up around his chest under his shirt to keep it out of sight.

“I think the kid’s a foreign spy in disguise,” the marshal said, standing at the outside door as Johnny reentered the office.

He tipped his hat to Cilla and turned to leave. He turned back around and pointed a finger at Johnny. You go *no place* with that belt without me or a deputy!”

“Yes, sir. I understand. No place at all. Not if I live to be a hundred.”

It was good for a chuckle among them but Johnny got the message.

Cal left and Cilla took charge of the belt, she being the woman and knowing about clothes and such.

“Two things come to mind immediately now that I’m looking at it in a slightly different way than before. First, it’s extra wide – probably even a struggle to slip it through the loops on your trousers.”

Johnny nodded. Cilla went on.

“Second, look how thick it is. That’s at least twice as thick as any regular belt I’ve seen.”

She handed it to Johnny who turned with it so he and Doc could examine that aspect of it together.

“Get my magnifying glass from the stand beside the exam table,” Doc said.

Johnny was back within a few seconds and handed it over. Doc examined the edges of the belt.

“To lengths of leather sewn together, I’d say,” was his conclusion.

Johnny took the magnifying glass and also looked, nodding. Cilla did the same. She began pinching the belt down its entire length.

“I think the scientific name for what I find is ‘squishy’,”

she said, handing it back to Johnny who went through the same pinching maneuver.

“Squishy would certainly be my word.”

“He passed it on to Doc.”

After a moment, he spoke.

“Spongy,” would be *my* word, but then my education in such matters is limited.

They again chuckled.

“Why would a belt maker pad a belt?” Johnny asked cutting to the bottom line question.

“I suppose there is one way to find out,” Doc said. “Surgery.”

Johnny looked puzzled. Cilla nodded and explained.

“We need to cut through the threads that hold the pieces together – on the back so it won’t mar the front in case the knife slips. Jake at the leather shop can stitch it back as good as new. What do you say?”

She and Doc were leaving the decision about that next step up to Johnny. It made him feel included – like they saw him as an equal in it – to have been given the final say. He readily agreed.

“Get a scalpel from the other room,” Doc said. “How about we let the lady’s fingers do the honors?”

“Yes,” Cilla added with a smile, “we certainly wouldn’t want to trust a scalpel to a surgeon’s hands.”

It was worth smiles all around.

Johnny agreed. Cilla worked carefully. Johnny grew impatient having no idea what would be found. She removed about ten inches of stitches across the top edge above the padding, then carefully inserted the scalpel to separate the two pieces of leather.

“Something in there, for sure,” she said. “Tweezers?”

Johnny retrieved them from the other room and Cilla inserted them carefully. She withdrew a piece of parchment-like paper – thick and stiff. It was folded long ways into fifths so it would fit the space. She handed it to Johnny. He carefully unfolded it. It looked very legal and was printed in red ink. The line of large print across the top read, ‘BEARER BOND’. He handed it to Doc who took some time silently reading down through the many lines of small print.

“Well, what you have here explains why somebody who knew about it would want it. This piece of paper is worth twenty thousand dollars to whomever has it in their possession (about a half million dollars in today’s value). A Bearer Bond is not made out to anybody specifically so anybody who has it – the bearer – can cash it in.”

“Twenty thousand dollars!” Johnny said

Doc and Cilla traded a long glance.

“Twenty thousand dollars!” Johnny repeated, sitting back and holding the piece of paper to his chest.

“Twenty thousand dollars, really?”

“That’s certainly what it says,” Doc said. “Raise the flag half way and get Cal back over here.” [At night Doc used a lantern in his window. During the day, he raised a triangular, red, flag from outside that window. Half way up meant it was not an emergency. All the way up, an emergency.]

That done, Doc motioned for Johnny to let Cilla examine the document. A few minutes later, the Marshal entered. Doc explained the situation and asked for a suggestion about handling it.”

“Let’s get the boy a lock box at the bank to keep it in until we can get it all sorted out. The bank will need to verify that it is authentic. Then we will need to arrange for a bank account – our local bank won’t handle that large a sum, but they will help set it up all proper like at some bigger bank. If I need to I’ll take it to Kansas City myself.”

“I have father’s lawyer in Kansas City,” Johnny said. “I’m sure he will do whatever legal things need to be done there.”

He wrote the man’s name and address on a slip of paper and handed it to the Marshal.

“Lift that flag all the way up. My deputy will come. I’ll have him stay here until I can talk with Mr. Yeager, the president of the bank.

The deputy arrived. Cal left. Johnny ran the flag back down. He and the other two continued to examine the belt.

“There is something else in there, Cilla,” Johnny said handing it back to her.

She pulled the two pieces of leather apart and nodded. Using the tweezers, she removed another folded piece of

paper. It was smaller. It contained a hand written message.

*“I, William Christopher Tuttle, do on this third day of March, eighteen hundred and eighty, assign this belt and all the rights that accrue thereto, to Jaques Dupree in full payment of the debt incurred to him this day at the Casino de la Reine, New Orleans.”*

It was witnessed by Judge, Jasper la Carte.

“Casino de la Reine. That means the Queen’s Casino in French, right?” Johnny asked.

“That’s right,” the other two said at the same time.

It seemed humorous and received a chuckle.

“So,” Johnny continued, “If the belt was used to pay off a gambling debt to a high stakes gambler, it had to be worth a bunch of money, and the gambler must have had some way to convince Mr. Dupree of its legitimacy – is that a word, legitimacy?”

Doc nodded. What’s the date on that Bearer Bond?”

“April first, of 1880.”

“So, the bond was purchased *after* Dupree gained title to the belt,” Doc said.’

“Then it couldn’t have been the bond in the belt that made it so valuable,” Johnny said trying to put things together in logical fashion

“I think we need to get Jake up here to examine this belt,” Cilla said. “I have a suspicion about it.”

They agreed. She left and was soon back with the local expert in all things about leather.

“This belt has several unique qualities,” Doc began not knowing what Cilla had already told him. “We’d like for you to examine it and tell us about anything that may seem odd or out of the ordinary.”

Johnny brought a straight-chair in from the waiting room and the man took a seat. He looked at the front. He looked at the back. He took a jeweler’s magnifier out of his vest pocket and put it to his eye apparently examining the stitching. Presently he sat back, lowered the belt to his lap and began speaking.

The front piece of the belt is the original belt and is considerably older than the back piece. I’m guessin’ in the neighborhood of 40 to 50 years older – you’ll notice the wear

marks around the buckle and on the back of it – now the inside. The other piece is fairly new and thinner. It has been tanned to be much softer – to have some give to it. The original stitching on the front piece has been entirely removed and the two pieces have been fastened together using the original holes from the front. The new thread is some thinner, but stronger than the original was – the hole is slightly too large on the front piece, but perfect on the back piece. It appears the buckle on it now was the original buckle since the new back piece does not extend more than a half inch under the flap that holds it in place. That buckle style looks very familiar. Let me take a closer look.

He examined it and the flap that held it in place. He pried up the flap and found that it snapped up for ease of replacing the buckle.

“I know why it was familiar. My father used that sort of buckle when I was a boy. He made this original belt. See there. The initials F.S. – Frank Seymour. He always signed his work under the flap. I do the same to this day. Anything else?”

“Can you tell if the carving – the symbols on the front piece – were on the original belt or have they been added later?”

It had been Johnny’s question. It had been perhaps the most essential question.

Jake picked it up and twisted it one way and the other.

“I’m going to say the front piece has two coats of shellac and the back piece only one. The inside of the cuts – the stamping – on the front have received both coats so I’m quite sure they were in the belt right from the git-go (beginning). My father could have done them.”

Johnny thanked him and offered him a dime for his time. Jake waved it off.

“Just happy to help. A very interesting piece, I’ll tell you that. When you’re ready for a saddle, you come by and I’ll give you a good deal.”

He left. The others sat quietly for a moment trying to put all the new facts into place.

Doc broke the silence.

“Looks like you are suddenly a very rich young man,



and from what we know about the belt, it looks like you are going to become even richer as soon as we figure out what those markings mean.”

Johnny sat back and sighed the deepest, longest sigh of his young life. He figured having lots of money meant lots of responsibility and he was quite sure that at thirteen he was NOT looking forward to that kind of responsibility. He just wanted to learn how to shoot a gun, win a few footraces against other guys his age, get through high school and get up the nerve to ask Clair if he could hold her hand on a walk along the creek.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE: Joy, Puzzlement and Disappointment**

The Marshal arranged for a lockbox. The bank president sent a telegram to verify the authenticity of the bond. Johnny, with the Marshal's help, composed and sent a telegram to his lawyer in Kansas City.

"You signed that, Scooter?" the Marshal said, really asking a question.

"That's how I was known back there and I'd just as soon nobody here found out about it. I figured that way, if somehow the telegram got intercepted by the wrong person, they couldn't connect the money stuff with me."

"Very clever. Telegrams *are* handled by a number of different people along the way."

"Can Frank, the telegraph guy here, be counted on to keep my secret?"

"You bet he can. He's my brother in law. But, I'll remind him just the same."

With that done the Marshal returned to marshaling and Johnny crossed the street to the newspaper office. He met Cilla just outside and pushed open the door to her office allowing her to enter ahead of him.

"What on earth happened in here?" Johnny asked.

The large wooden tray that held the type that was used to set the words in the plates that went into the press to print the pager, was overturned and the tiny pieces of type were scattered everywhere. Many of the papers on Cilla's desk had been torn in two and tossed about. Books from her bookcase had been pulled off the shelves and lay on the floor.

Johnny was immediately out the door blowing the whistle. Doc stuck his head out the window upstairs to see what was going on and Johnny gave him the short version, since the short version was all he knew at that point.

The Marshal and a deputy came on the run. Cal sent the deputy upstairs with orders to be extremely vigilant (watchful) since the disorder downstairs could have been a distraction so someone could get into Doc's office and find the belt.

"Anything taken?" the Marshal asked Cilla.

She was just standing there, disbelief on her face.

"Hard to tell. Lots of papers torn up. Almost like the person didn't know which papers were important so they tried to ruin all of them."

"Somebody who couldn't read, maybe," Johnny said.

"An interesting observation," Cilla said.

"You after somebody, again, Cilla?" the marshal asked.

Johnny assumed it meant that was not the first time her office had been ransacked by folks who wanted her to get her nose out of their business.

Johnny set to picking up the pieces of type, sorting them as he went into four jars – A to F, G to L, M to R, and S to Z. Later he would re-sort the contents of each jar into the separate letters. It was a plan Cilla thought was quite clever. The deputy returned saying things were fine up in Doc's office. The Marshal had him stay and help set the furniture back in order – the tables and chairs and bookcases that had all been turned over.

It was after three o'clock by the time things were back to some semblance (appearance) of order there in the office. Cilla thanked Johnny for his help.

"I've determined that it's my notes on the Kendal family that have been removed," she said."

"Stolen, you mean."

"Well, yes."

"Can you re-do the notes?"

"This old head never forgets a juicy tidbit, and the Kendal's story is chock full of such things."

"Can I hear about it or is that private – if it is I understand."

“Well, since I know Johnny’s secret, I think it’s only fair that Johnny knows Cilla’s secret.”

They stood behind the large type tray – dozens of small open boxes, each of which held one letter or punctuation mark or other symbol that was used in setting the type for a paper. As they sorted from the jars, Cilla related the story.”

“William Kendal – his ranch is the W Bar K (W – K) – now includes almost a dozen other smaller ranches that Kendal took over down through the years.”

“He must have been very rich to have purchased all that land,” Johnny said.

“That’s the problem. He didn’t purchase it – well, not at fair prices, at least. It has long been suspected that he come by the land in illicit (illegal) ways. Nothing has ever been proved and the men from whom he so-called bought the land immediately left the area and haven’t been heard from since.

“A few months ago, a young man came to town and inquired of me about Kendal, claiming that he had cheated his father out of the land. I asked if he had any proof. He said he had none – that was why he had come back – to try and prove it. I never saw the young man again.”

“The Marshal know about all that – the young man disappearing?”

“Oh, yes, but with nothing to go on there was nothing he could do.”

“But the man disappeared?”

“Men ride through Red Bend all the time and never return. Hard to call it a disappearance, you see.”

“Yes. I see. So, where does your story stand?”

“It’s at the point of listing the ranches he has taken over, and asking readers if they have any information about where the former owners live now, and any information or rumors about why they sold out and left.”

“So, you haven’t come right out and accused him?”

“Goodness no, but if he’s guilty of wrongdoing you can bet I’m making him pretty uncomfortable.”

“I can understand that. Any responses to your stories?” Johnny asked.

“A few. The Ingram’s – Vernon Ingram’s – house was burned to the ground and their cattle were reportedly rustled.

There was some speculation that the cattle brand had been changed from V-I to W-K not really very difficult to do, I suppose – but the cattle all disappeared. I figure that once the brand was changed they could have been sold and immediately shipped back east to the slaughter houses.”

“Didn’t Marshal Calvin follow up on it?”

“That was years before Cal was the Marshal. Back then all we had here was a part time sheriff – and not a very good one. He was named Kattley. He was referred to as Scardey Kattley. Does that paint the picture for you?”

“It sure does. Pretty funny, really. So, nothing ever came of it?”

“That’s right. But you believe Kendal was responsible for it.”

“I’ve been looking into it for years. Buying out one rancher who had suffered such a terrible loss could be considered a benevolent act of kindness. But twelve? I don’t think so. A newspaper reporter is supposed to be unbiased, but I really have the urge to burn the man.”

“That doesn’t really sound like unbiased, Cilla.”

The exchanged smiles.

“By the way – and this may not be a really good time to bring it up – but I rewrote that story you looked at for me. You made a lot of good suggestions. When you have time you can look at it again.”

He handed it to her.

“Always happy to see what you’ve written. Never hesitate.”

They worked until nearly five and still did not have all the type sorted.

“I suggest we stop for the night,” Cilla said, “or my eyes will be crossed and I’ll never get them looking straight ahead again. Won’t be setting the paper until Thursday. Set Thursday, print Friday, circulate Saturday.”

“I should get back up to Doc’s. He said he had something planned for dinner tonight. You think he’s a good cook?”

“I’m not really certain the man has ever cooked a meal in his life. He always eats at the restaurant – The R&B. I imagine that’s where the two of you will be headed.”

“Sounds expensive.”

“Look who’s talking about *expensive* – the richest boy in all of Kansas.”

“I haven’t come to grips with that, yet. I really don’t want to be rich. I don’t know how to be rich. Father and Mother had plenty of money, I think, but I’m fairly sure they weren’t rich.”

“You have a long time to grow into the idea. Don’t rush it. Money knows how to sit in a bank and wait. There are lots of great things a person can do with his wealth. You will find ways to use it wisely – I have no doubt about that.”

“Thanks for that. It helped. I haven’t been relaxing about it. I worried about it all night. Well, I’ll see you later.”

Johnny left and was soon upstairs.

“Hope you’re hungry.”

“I’m thirteen. I’m always hungry.”

“I thought we’d find dinner over at the R&B Restaurant, this evening.”

“I imagine I can pay – or I’ll soon be able to pay you back, at least.”

“This is my treat. Think of it as your one month birthday.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“One month ago, when the Marshal laid you down on my table I didn’t give you one chance in a hundred of pulling through. So, this is like the end of the first month of your new life.”

“I was really that bad off?”

“You really were. The man who reached you first where you were lying on the seat of the stage thought you were dead. If it hadn’t been for the Marshal’s insistence that I take a look at you, you would have been.”

“I owe the Marshal more than I realized.”

“You owe him nothing. He did what good human beings want to do. It is our privilege to assist each other – our purpose in life – to make things good for each other.”

“I’d certainly never thought of it in that way. You always have things to say that make me think about things in different ways. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome for that. Now, I for one have a

hankerin' for a thick old steak and a baked potato – how about you?”

“The thicker and baked-ier the better.”

“They chuckled.”

Doc let Johnny pick a table. He'd never been asked to do that before and he took some time deciding on one near the rear.”

“From back here we can see everyone, but won't be expected to speak to anybody we don't want to.”

“Seems like a well thought out plan,” Doc said.

They took seats and Doc shifted the focus of the conversation.

“How about in the morning we let Jessie take us out to the Red Mountains and you show me what you found. Since you mentioned your find back there, some things have come to me that may give some direction to our search.”

“Oh, *Jessie* your horse. I was confused there for a minute. Great! I'm thinking I need to get back to Aunt Mae anyway. I hate to think of her out there all by herself at night.”

“You do realize that she has been spending nights alone out there for the past fifty or so years, don't you?”

Johnny smiled.

“It's hard for me to think back on thirteen years let alone fifty.”

Johnny declared the steak the best he'd ever eaten and the apple pie almost as good as his Aunt Mae's.

That evening Doc had several patients – a seven-year-old with a broken arm, a baby with colic, an expectant mother thinking the time had come, but it hadn't. Johnny gained even more respect for Doc as he listened to his kind gentle way with them. Johnny spent the time reading in the bed room.

Later, they played a few hands of one of the card games Mr. Dupree had taught Johnny on the stage. He ended the night two tongue depressors ahead of Doc.

The next morning it was bacon, eggs, toast, and grits at the Restaurant. Apparently, Cilla had been correct about Doc's 'cooking' preferences.

On the way out of tow, they stopped by the Marshal's office. Doc always let him know where he'd be when he left town and Johnny thought it would be good for him to know



that he was on his way home.

The Marshal reached under his leather vest and removed a piece of paper from his shirt pocket.

“Frank brought this telegram to me. It’s for you, but I read it before I realized that. Sorry.”

“That’s alright. I don’t seem to have any secrets from you. What’s it about?”

“The Bond is for real. The agency suggested the name of a bank in Kansas City that will handle accounts that large. They will even send a courier out here to pick it up and see that it gets safely to their bank. I just imagine you will be getting top of the line treatment from them. I was thinking that once that is complete you may want to set up a bank account here to keep a few bucks in for emergencies and such.”

“I’ll think about that. I know very little about handling money. Thanks for all that. I suppose tell them to come and get it. Maybe better wait to hear from my lawyer. Whatever you think is best.”

Clearly Johnny was confused about the best course of action.

“I think your idea is best – wait to hear from your lawyer,” the Marshal said. “He’ll probably get back to you later today. I’ll send a deputy your way with the telegram if it comes in.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate the way you’ve gone out of your way to help me.”

“It’s what we do, right?”

That was essentially the same message Doc had given him, just in Cal’s short and to the point way of saying things – human beings took good care of each other. Johnny wanted to thank the Marshal for saving his life, but he thought that needed to be just a private thing between the two of them and he wanted to think about just what the right words would be to express his gratitude.

Back in the buggy, Doc handed the reins to Johnny and humorously said: “Jessie, this is Johnny. I have the idea he’ll be on this end of your reins a lot during the next few years.”

Jessie raised her head up and down and snorted as if to welcome him and say she understood.

He set a leisurely pace thinking that was more

appropriate for Doc than the full out gallop he would have really enjoyed.

Johnny still had to break the news about the money to his aunt. He wasn't sure how to do that so decided to wait until later.

They stopped at the house and tied up Jessie in the shade by the water trough. After a bit of small talk with Mae, Doc and Johnny set off on foot to explore the mountains.

Johnny found Doc was slow but steady and far stronger than he had assumed a man of his age would be. Doc explained.

"I got one speed, son, but I can keep at it for days at a time."

Half way to the hills they stopped and Johnny pointed out the four peaks he thought were represented on the belt. Doc was clearly most interested in the area in the middle. They made their way in that direction.

He stopped them some twenty yards out and pointed up toward the top of a free-standing rock formation. It was perhaps thirty feet high, eight feet wide and nearly square at the base, narrowing rapidly near the top – the top that was formed in the shape of that lazy, backward, 'L' (↵). The flat top extended five feet to the right (east) and at the end turned a few feet straight down. Not a perfect match, but close enough.

"My friends and I played back here when I was a boy," Doc said. "Believe it or not I once climbed to the top of it – lassoed that overhang and hand-over-handed my way up. I knew this territory pretty well back then."

"So," Johnny said, "the lazy 'L' thing is not to the right of the whole set of hills like it appears to be in the group of symbols on the belt, but it's just to the right of the opening between the first two hills."

[ ® /VVxV\ ↵ » 22 ☺☺ ]

"That's the way I'm seeing it," Doc said.

"So, that sort of confuses things – throws off the sequence," Johnny said frowning.

"Perhaps the little 'x' refers to the place where the four figures to the ride side will be found," Doc suggested.

"What I'm calling the lazy 'L', if it is this outcropping, would tend to suggest that is true," Johnny said his frown

disappearing in a hurry. It probably also means the corporal's insignia is really just arrows or directional symbols of some kind."

"I'm thinking that as well," Doc said. "The next problem is that 22 – inches, feet, yards?"

"Or rocks, trees, bushes, or dead men laid end to end?" Johnny added, the frown returning.

Doc had taken a seat on a friendly looking flat rock that sat in the shade of the larger rock formation. Johnny sat as well.

"Can we agree the 22 represents some things out there to the east?" Johnny asked.

"I think so. And, if it is some form of measurement, which of the typical sorts of measurements would *not* fit between here and the base of the next hill to the east?"

"What an interesting way to back into a solution, Doc. Eliminate what couldn't be. It would certainly eliminate my dead men. Twenty-two of them would stretch out some 125 or so feet. There can't be more than, what, six or seven yards between here and there?"

"And I think you have solved the message included in the 22," Doc said.

"How did I do that?"

"Think about it. Twenty-two what's would fit between here and the next hill – that one you just determined was about *seven yards* away?"

"Ah. Seven yards equals twenty-one feet. So, it's 22 *feet*. I'm a genius."

He got to his feet and walked to the hill. It was basically just rock upon rock piled a hundred feet high.

"I don't get it, Doc. If we've figured things right we have come right up to whatever that fancy sun symbol means, but there's nothing here but rocks."

Doc stood up and walked to join him.

"There was a legend back when I was a boy that one of the Red Mountains contained a cave, but we searched for it and I'd stake my youth on the fact there isn't one."

"How many doo dads make up that sun thing?" Johnny asked trying to remember. [☀️]

Doc thought for a moment.

“As I recall there were one top and bottom, one left and right and one in between each of them,” Doc said.

“That would be eight and I’m sure that’s right,” Johnny said.

“You’re thinking the number of doo dads may somehow play a part in the code,” Doc said.

“All we have left is one circular shape made up of eight squiggly marks. It’s the last clue we have to go on.”

“I see,” Doc said. “Yes. That does seem to be the case. I’ll tell you, if you can find a cave in that mountain you’re a better man than a hundred who have looked for it before you.”

“Seems we’re at a dead end, then.”

Doc nodded and put his arms around Johnny’s shoulders and they began the walk back toward the house.

## **CHAPTER SIX: Chocolate Cake, Gold, and Wonderful Hugs**

Johnny asked Doc to stick around while he broke the money news to his Aunt. Mae and Doc had been lifelong friends. After the explanation, Mae had only one question.

“Are you alright about it, Johnny?”

“Not yet, but I’m told I will grow into it. I’m going to have to depend on you two and Cilla and the Marshal to help me. I’m confident that by the time I’m your age I will have begun to get used to it.”

That produced smiles and chuckles.

“Who did you say was the donor of the belt?” Mae asked somewhat awkwardly.

“Dupree?”

“No, I mean the name on the note.”

“William Tuttle.”

“There was a boy by the name of Tuttle who lived here for just a couple of years. You won’t remember him, Doc. He was in and out while you were away at medical school. It was just the boy and his father. As I recall the boy was always in trouble – that’s probably why I remember the name. But, I don’t think his name was William or Bill or Billy. . . . No, it was Chris.”

“That’s this man’s middle name, Christopher.”

“Could be then, I suppose.”

“It might explain several baffling aspects of things,” Doc said. “Like the connection to Red Bend and if he is somehow linked to whatever it is out there in the Red Mountains, it might

explain how he came to know that area up there.”

“Red Bend isn’t mentioned in the note,” Johnny said. “But, I suppose he could have told Mr. Dupree. Well, he had to, I suppose, since Dupree was headed here. I wonder if he told him anything more about how to locate the whatever it is.”

“That, we will probably never know,” Doc said. “If Pinto Man was in New Orleans at the time of the belt exchange he may have even been at the same card playing table.”

“What I’m thinking about,” Johnny said, “is that Chris or William or whoever must have found some place to hide something up in that Red Mountain that we missed, Doc.”

“More and more it seems like that. We’ll just have to keep thinking on it. But, I must be getting back to town. Don’t feel right being away this long.”

“I baked a cake for you while you were snooping around out back. Johnny can pick up the cake tin sometime when he’s in town.”

Doc thanked her. Johnny brought Jessie and the buggy around and Doc started making his way back to Red Bend.

Mae turned to Johnny as they stood on the porch watching Doc move down the road. Facing him, she put her hands on his shoulders.

“I’m very proud of the way you’re handling things, Johnny. So much is being thrown at you so fast.”

Johnny shrugged and managed a smile. He had no idea how to respond to such a statement. What choice did he have *but* to handle things?

“Cake inside,” she said understanding it had been an awkward moment for the boy.

Cake was always a good diversion. He got the idea she was learning that. Sweets always seemed to show up just at the right times.

They sat across the kitchen table from each other both enjoying one of Mae’s specialties – chocolate, strawberry, marble cake.

“Anything else you can remember about the Tuttle boy or his dad?” Johnny asked.

“Well, let’s see. He was about seventeen. He and his father both worked at the stage office – his dad’s job was to

keep the coaches in good repair as I recall, and Chris helped care for the horses.”

“You said the boy was often in trouble.”

“Little things. He was sort of bully, I guess. I think once he stole money from the poor box at church. Nothing really big, but big enough so the men kept their hands on their wallets when he walked by. Bad reputations make folks seem to be worse than they may really be you understand.”

Johnny nodded – it wasn’t polite to talk when his mouth was full.

Eventually he had another question.

“Why did they leave town, do you remember?”

“Oh, yes. I remember. There was a special armored wagon that came through carrying gold from Denver to the mint in Philadelphia. It was pulled by six huge horses and was guarded by two wagon loads of soldiers. Mr. Tuttle was responsible for doing general maintenance on the wagon – I don’t remember the details if I ever knew them.

“Short story is, two hours beyond Red Bend when the wagons were fording the Snake River, some important part of the wagon failed and it came loose from the horses and turned over in the water. A considerable amount of the gold was somehow lost. Tuttle was fired for not having found and fixed the defect and he and Chris left immediately.”

“So, Tuttle or maybe the father and son Tuttles might have intentionally created some dysfunction in the armored wagon that caused the loss of a substantial amount of gold,” Johnny said wanting to make sure he understood.

Mae nodded.

“If I were writing that story it would go this way. Mr. Tuttle and his son managed to steal a great deal of gold from the wagon while he was supposedly servicing it at the station. Then, he added some sort of a float mechanism, which, when the wagon entered the water, disconnected the tongue from the horses making it appear the gold had been lost in the accident.

“If the Tuttles were smart, they would have hidden the gold here in a place they had ready for it ahead of time. Then they left figuring to come back at a later time to retrieve it.

“For some reason, they didn’t make it back. For some

other reason, they put the code for finding it on that belt. Then, a boy named Johnny came to possess the belt, figured out the code and discovered the gold.”

“Hey. I’d read a story like that. Better get to writing it.”

“Only after I find the gold.”

“You know,” Mae said clearly trying to remember something, “I do believe it came out in the investigation that the gold in that shipment had originally been stolen from a number of different sources on out west. So, even if you find it, there will be nobody to return it to. I imagine Pricilla at the newspaper office will know the full story.”

“Was that the first time that armored wagon came through and stopped at the stage office here?”

“Goodness no. It came through at least four times a year often carrying gold from the mint in Denver.”

“So, Tuttle could have been planning the theft for a long time before it took place.”

“I suppose so. Like I said, Pricilla will be a more reliable source than I am.”

“I think the cake will hold me a while. It was wonderful. I’ll pump some water to the garden then I’d like to get into town and talk with Cilla about the Tuttle story, if that’s okay.”

“Certainly. I’ll cut a piece for Pricilla, if you’ll take it along.”

“Of course. Thanks.”

A half hour later he was back in town. First, he stuck his head in the door of the Marshal’s office.

“Seen that pinto, since the man lit out of here?”

“No reports.”

“That belt still safe and sound in there?”

“Sure is.”

“Alright, then. Thanks.”

He crossed the street to the newspaper office. Cilla was sitting behind her long table.

“Got a minute – or ten?”

“Always have as many as you need. What’s on your mind?”

“First, cake from Aunt Mae to you and then Tuttle?”

It had been a one word question.

“Tuttle. That’s been quite a while back. I hadn’t made



that connection. Good work.”

She related essentially the same story as Mae had told him.

“Do you remember how much gold was lost?” Johnny asked.

“I remember it was shipped in ingots, which at that time, that weighed 27 pounds each. The rumor was that the wagon was carrying five hundred of them. Fifty were lost in the river – according to the story. My father always thought losing an even number like that seemed fishy. I saw the armored transport wagon several times as a young woman. It was only about fifteen feet long and five wide, it had two sets of huge, double wheels set into eight inch axles. That was a bit of overkill on what was actually needed. What would 500 of those ingots weigh?”

“Well,” Johnny said beginning to do the math, “500 of them at 27 pounds each would be 13,500 pounds or about 7 ½ tons. A strong work horse can pull a load of 10,000 pounds or more. I’d say six horses was excessive. It undoubtedly kept them relatively fresh over long distances, though, and if they ever needed to outrun bad guys six would be able to put on lots of speed over a mile or so.”

Cilla explained further.

“Those wagons had metal plates covering them on all six surfaces – sides, bottom, and across the top – so the total weight would have been considerably more than a run of the mill wagon. There were also two wagons that carried armed guards – a dozen in each – they were pulled by teams of four.”

“I assume the ingot wagon was under guard 24 hours a day,” Johnny said thinking out loud. “Tuttle probably had some way to get in from underneath. What’s an ingot worth, today, you have any idea?” Johnny asked.

“My paper still runs prices being paid for gold. My father started that column back during the gold rush in the 1840s. I get an update every week by mail. Let’s see, this week it’s worth about \$21.00 an ounce.”

Johnny did some quick calculations in his head.

“So, if Tuttle took 50 of them, that would be \$21 an ounce times about 400 troy ounces in an ingot would equal \$8,400 an ingot times 50 of them would put the total at about

\$420,000.00. [Today's value would be just over nine million dollars.] Not a bad haul even he had spent two years setting up the robbery."

"I'd take that kind of a salary," Cilla said, chuckling.

"How big is an ingot?"

"That book of weights and measures right there may tell you."

Johnny looked through it for some time.

"Alright, it says a typical ingot is 7 X 3 5/8 X 1 3/4 inches. I'll need a pencil and paper for this."

Cilla slid them in his direction.

"One ingot contains 44 cubic inches. Take that times 50 of them and you get 2,200 cubic inches. Divide that by the number of cubic inches in a cubic foot – about 1,700 I think – and you get something just over one cubic foot. So, I'm not looking for a very big hiding place. Twelve inches by fifteen inches by fifteen inches would be plenty of space."

"It would all fit in my safe there," she said pointing.

"Thanks. Now I know what I'm looking for. I must admit I had figured it would take a much bigger space than that."

"What do you know about the actual source of the gold back in Colorado? Aunt Mae thought she remembered that it may have been stolen."

"That came out after the robbery was investigated. The Philadelphia mint had no knowledge the shipment was on its way – because it wasn't. Everything about it was bogus (fake). It rapidly became a game of Finders Keepers. Lots of men went looking for the wagon. It never surfaced once it passed the stage station at Lawrence. There are some reports that its burned remains were found several months later in southwestern Missouri. The illicit nature of the cargo is upheld by the fact that the man in charge of the transportation, refused to file a report about the loss. For a time, there was a short-lived gold rush right there at the ford in Rattle Snake River. When no gold was found, the whole incident was looked upon suspiciously."

Johnny walked to the door preparing to leave.

"Thank your Aunt for me," Cilla said. "I'll enjoy the cake after lunch."

Johnny raised his hand acknowledging her remark and walked through the open door arranging his hands for his own benefit to show the amount of room he figured was needed in terms of a hiding place. He was more determined than ever to find it.

He double stepped his way up to see Doc who was cleaning up a bloody mess at the examination table.

He saw the pained expression on Johnny's face.

"Another bullet. The marshal's in the leg of a would-be horse thief down at the livery stable."

Regardless of whose blood it was, it reminded the boy the pool of his own blood in which he had laid on the floor of the stage coach. Momentarily it brought back a rush of terribly frightening images and feelings. He directed his gaze elsewhere in the room and filled Doc in on what he and Cilla had figured about the size and worth of the gold stash."

"And what are your plans for all that money if you find the gold?" Doc asked. "I figured you were tired of acquiring wealth."

"I am, but while I was thinking about things last night waiting to fall asleep I decided it would be better if I became its guardian rather than somebody who might put it to less than honorable use."

"A very wise position. I commend you for it. You know how proud your parents would be of you for that."

Aside from a few tears when he had first been told of his parents' deaths and a few more at the funeral, his life had changed so rapidly that Johnny really hadn't had a chance to do his grieving over losing them. He looked into Doc's face and tears began pouring from his eyes. Doc put down the towel and moved to embrace the boy. He held him quietly for going on fifteen minutes. He had wondered when it would happen. He knew it needed to happen, but Doc was not the kind to press. He was just happy he was there to be with his precious new friend when the time finally came.

Eventually Johnny eased away and looked around the room.

"Towels in the cabinet," Doc said pointing.

Johnny got one and began drying his face and neck and chest. There were several lingering, quivering sighs

before he managed a full deep breath and spoke.

“Thanks. I guess I had lots of left over junk from things before.”

He took out his wallet and removed three pictures.

“This is my Mother and Father.”

Doc held the picture and examined it at length.

I can certainly see the resemblance,” Doc said. Your mother’s hair and your father’s eyes and nose – the best features from each I’d say.”

Johnny grinned and nodded and offered a second picture.

“This is the front of our house. It’s the only place I had ever lived ‘til I came out here. My best friend, Edward, lived in the house that you can just barely see there on the right.”

“Does your room show in the picture?”

Johnny pointed – second floor, left corner.

Doc nodded without comment.

Johnny produced the third picture.

“Diablo – my horse. I got him for my eighth birthday. He was five years old in this picture. I named him before I knew it meant devil in Spanish. He had a very gentle soul. Once I found out the meaning I started calling him ‘Diab’ for short. He seemed to like that.”

Doc stacked the pictures and handed them back.

“Thank you for sharing those things with me. I feel closer to you, now.”

“I do, too – to you, I mean. I’m not ready to show those around to other folks yet. You think that’s alright?”

“That is strictly on your timetable. Since you asked, I would counsel you not to rush it. You will know when the time is right.”

He reached out and took the towel from Johnny.

“You know, I have that huge cake in my room and I’m sure if it doesn’t get eaten today it will get hard and worse, stale even. Could you possibly help it avoid that terrible fate?”

“I think I could make that sacrifice – but only this once – today!”

It was cause for grin to meet grin. As they ate Doc related things from his boyhood days – both those for the general public and those Johnny understood should remain

just between them. Their bond grew.

At two o'clock there was a knock at the door and a mother and her young daughter entered the outer office. Johnny knew it was time for him to share his dear new friend with others. He could do that.

They shared a lingering hug and Johnny left. It would become their tradition – to share a hug upon parting.

Downstairs, he stopped in to say goodbye to Cilla. She had some information. He approached the table where she was sitting.

“See what I found on the floor under an overturned crate by the back door.”

She took a neckerchief from her desk drawer and handed it across the table for Johnny to examine.

“Not your regular run-of-the-mill neckerchief, I'd say? Black with a white design. I've seen blue and white and red and white but never black and white. What do you make of it?”

“There's a new man riding with Kendal, these days. They rode into town together a few hours ago. Black saddle with white trim. Dressed in black with white stitching.”

“You think it may belong to him?”

“Only connection I can make,” she said.

“What do you think he is – another cow hand?”

“He looked more like a hired gun – a dying breed these days.”

“You say they're in town.”

“Over at the saloon. Horses are still out on the street.”

“Does the Marshal know about the neckerchief?”

“Sure does.”

“And where you found it?”

“Yes. I can see the wheels turning in that blond head of yours.”

“Since it was under a crate that had been turned over during the vandalizing of the office, that pretty well attaches it to the person or people who in here doing the vandalizing. All we need to do is find the man it belongs to and we'll have a good idea where to start our search for your bad guys.”

“I follow your logic. If Kendal is as ruthless a man as I think he is, you must be very careful. I assume you have an

idea.”

“There is this kid, say blond and thirteen, and he happens to follow Black and White guy when he leaves the saloon, and he happens to pick up a neckerchief that man drops so he runs up to him and asks if it’s his. If he says yes, we have a connection.”

“And if he knows where he really lost it, he will know that you suspect him of the vandalism and your hide will be toast.”

“Exactly where are their horses?”

“In front of the general store – the dapple and the black. They went in there first – for tobacco I suspect because they were packing their cheeks when they came out.”

Johnny looked across the street. The general store was to his right. The saloon was to his far left. The Marshal’s office was in between.

“I got it covered. If I may have the neckerchief, I’ll go get set for Operation B and W.”

“It’s worth a try. Here you go.”

Johnny examined the neckerchief more closely.

“Monogramed, did you see that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Look. A tiny T T in one corner. This guy has money. I’ll check his saddle bags. Men given to showing off often have monogramed saddle bags. First, let me mark this cloth. May I borrow a pen?”

With the black ink, Johnny put a period sized dot in the center of the nine white somewhat larger white dots in the corner opposite the monogram.

“That’s in case the Marshal needs proof it’s the one you found in here.”

“The more I get to know you the more I’m inclined to agree with Cal – you really are a super sleuth (detective) in disguise.”

Johnny grinned, stowed the cloth in his front pocket and took a leisurely walk across the street. He sat on the plank sidewalk with his back up against a building close to the saloon. He didn’t have to wait long.

Johnny didn’t know Kendal, but he had been described as a tall man in his sixties, with broad shoulders, white hair

and moustache. The man with him was tall and slender, dressed in black, his black boots decorated in white arrowheads. He let them pass, keeping his head down, playing with his knife. He took out the neckerchief, took in a deep breath, and trotted after them.

“Sir! Sir! I think you dropped this.”

They both turned and looked at Johnny, then at the neckerchief.

“It’s like the one you’re wearing, Sir. I found it a few minutes ago, so thought I’d hang around and see if I could find the owner. It is a fine-looking neckerchief, I’ll say that.”

The Black and White man slid his hand down his side, carefully unstrapped his six gun, and removed it from its holster.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN: Bad Guys and a New Perspective**

The tall thin man dressed in black removed a bullet from the cylinder of his gun and handed it to Johnny.

“Thanks, son. You can trade this bullet for a nickel – or a shot of whiskey when you get some fuzz on that upper lip.” [Cowboys often traded a bullet for a small glass of whiskey, thus it came to be known as a ‘shot’ of whiskey.]

The two men laughed.

“Thank you very much, Sir.”

Johnny offered his hand for a shake.

“I’m Johnny Baker, good to make your acquaintance.”

The man accepted his hand and shook.

“I’m called Tex Tourane.”

The men turned and continued on their way still laughing about the little joke. For appearances, Johnny went back to sitting against a building and playing with his knife until he could see that the two men were headed west out of town.

He went to report to the Marshal what had just happened.

“Very clever. Very dangerous. Tourane has the reputation of being a gun for hire.”

“Seemed like a very nice gentleman. Tipped his hat. Shook my hand. I must say I came close to wetting myself when I realized he was reaching for his gun.”

Johnny showed the Marshal the bullet.

“If he’d have cut his initials into it you could probably get fifty cents for it. Like I said, quite a reputation. Want to trade it for a nickel?”

“Thanks, but no. I think I’ll just carry it for a while. I need to be getting back home. Still have to chop firewood for the kitchen. Will you tell Cilla what I found out?”

“Sure will. You watch your step, now. This Tourane character is nobody to be messing with.”

Johnny tried to put out of mind the fact that the down side of his life suddenly included a gun for hire and a high stakes gambler out to obtain his prize possession at most any cost.

Johnny walked most of the way home. His aunt’s place was no more than a fifteen-minute walk. He could trot it in five. It was an ideal spot, he thought. Far enough out in the country to feel rural but close enough to feel safe.

He thought as he walked.

‘Since that belt had the symbols stamped into it when it was made forty or more years ago, and since it had to have been made before the Tuttles were fired, the hiding place described on the belt had to have been established well before the robbery. They left town immediately afterward, and Frank’s father had made the belt there in Red Bend. That meant the hiding place had been found and made ready to receive the gold well ahead of time. It would have given them plenty of time to arrange a very good, very well hidden, spot.’

He wondered what they had all missed about that final symbol – the sun-like symbol. [ ☀ ] What different perspective could he give to it? A sun is up in the sky. The opposite would be flat on the ground. In his search up to that point, he had been looking at flat surfaces, but not on the ground – on vertical (up and down) surfaces like the flat sides of the larger rocks in the mountain. If what he needed to be doing was to look down on it, he needed to be up above it – up on the mountain. He had not tried climbing that hill yet. It would be the next thing on his agenda – after the wood chopping.

He relayed the, “Say hello from me to your Aunt” wishes that had come from Cilla, Doc, and the Marshal and then got to work with the axe. He liked chopping wood. For one thing, it made him feel powerful. For another, it proved to him that he had recovered fully from his injury. And, of course, there were the great meals the kindling allowed Aunt

Mae to cook and the goodies she baked.

It was four o'clock by the time he had the wood box filled by the kitchen stove.

"I'm going to go back to the hills, Aunt Mae. Be home by six for dinner."

"Be careful. Better bring Mabel (her horse) into the barn before you leave. Smells like a good thunder and lightning soaker will be coming in this evening."

He didn't know how she knew, but she had always been right about such things. He wondered if man would ever *really* be able to predict the weather. He'd not rule it out, but he did sincerely doubt it.

The hill to the east of the 'lazy L' rock was fairly steep and took some careful doing to climb. After a few minutes, he found himself only twenty feet off the ground. He stopped and turned to look down. A single spot below him caught his eye. *That* could have been it. It was a circular stone, flat, six feet in diameter looking to be part of a ledge about fifteen feet off the ground. There were rocks placed around its periphery (outside edge). He counted them.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight," he said out loud as he pointed to each one. "Eight rocks around a circle, just like on the symbol. Those somethings could be rocks."

His heart raced as he let himself hope he might have actually found that final, elusive, part to the puzzle. He worked his way back down the hill toward it. His path led him to come at it from the north side. From back there he saw there was a set of steps cut into the rock face of the hill. Each step had a rock or two set on it as if to disguise its purpose. It had very effectively done just that. He had looked at it from ground level many times and had not seen it as a set of steps.

He immediately understood several things. He could see that the circular stone was at least eight inches thick around the edge. It would, therefore, weigh many hundreds of pounds. On the front side, it extended six or so inches beyond the rock base on which it sat. The eight rocks, which set upon it, looked to weigh between ten and thirty pounds each. There was a two-foot-wide ledge or lip around the back side against which the circular stone sat, and it extended back into a

circular recess in the solid rock side of the hill.

Questions came to mind. Did the stone turn like a wheel and by doing so somehow reveal an opening? Could the circular stone be pushed back into the side of the hill? Was there perhaps a door of some kind underneath it out front? Were the rocks on it arranged to point at something or provide some sort of direction or a further clue? What might happen if the rocks were moved or even removed?

As he stood beside it looking down at it from such close range he noticed that the rocks toward the back side – nearest the hillside – were considerably smaller than those toward the front. It was also obvious that the stones had been spaced fairly evenly around the outside edge. They had not just randomly fallen into place up the mountain above.

He mounted the wide stone lip that encircled the circular stone. He put a foot on the circular stone. It held him. He put both feet on it and stood on it. It held him. He gave a little jump. It held him. He began moving the rocks off the stone, back onto the lip next to the mountainside. He started with those closest to the hill – they were the lightest and easily rolled or slid back onto the lip. The remaining four at the front were a good deal heavier. He rested between each of them, but he was able to manage to lift or slide them all off onto the outer lip.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting to happen at that point, but nothing did. Momentarily, he experienced a feeling of disappointment. He took a seat on it – near the center – legs folded in front of him. The big flat rock swayed just a bit. It was as if the back side – the side nearest the mountain – dipped downward, perhaps no more than a half inch. He scooted back just a few more inches. It happened again – the back of the large stone sank at the back and rose slightly at the front.

It came to him in a flash. That circular slab of stone must have some sort of axle-like mechanism at the center of the north and south edges, and the balance of the piece – front and back – would allow the front to be raised with very little effort. It was why the heaviest stones had been placed to the front – to keep the front weighted down and in place.

He bellied down and looked over the front edge. There

was a narrow ledge cut from the base rock three feet below the overhang.

“A place to stand,” he said to himself.

He turned around and let his feet dangle over the edge and let himself down until he was standing on that lower ledge. From there he would be in an ideal position to pull up on the front edge of the circular stone. He did just that, and with virtually no effort it lifted – well, the front lifted and the back pivoted down into a hole which had clearly been quarried out just to fit it in size and shape. Somebody had gone to a good deal of work to create it.

The bottom of the hole was four or so feet deep. Sitting on the bottom was a trunk – a metal trunk eighteen inches deep, eighteen inches tall and twenty-four inches wide. Those were close to the dimensions he and Cilla had determined the stack of gold ingots would be.

Johnny’s heart returned to a very rapid bumpity, bump, bump cadence (rhythm). He climbed down into the hole. The trunk had a metal lock on the front and two large metal hinges along the back. He tried to loosen the lock. Nothing. He sat back on his legs to think. He picked up a small rock – maybe five pounds – and began hammering at the lock. It was severely rusted and soon fell free from the trunk.

Johnny took a deep breath and tugged on the top to pull it open. With difficulty, it began to move. The old hinges squeaked and a layer of rust fell away. He soon had it open. Johnny didn’t know for sure how to react to what he found inside. On one level, it was extremely exciting. On another it felt like lots more responsibility for him. On either level, it looked a whole lot like fifty gold ingots.

He reached into the trunk and ran his hand across one of them. It felt like iron – very cold iron – very cold *yellow* iron. He bent down and placed his hands under one of the bars and lifted it. It certainly seemed close to thirty pounds to him. He sat it back in place and closed the lid. He turned to climb out of the hole and set things back as they had been.

It was at that moment he saw the man on horseback coming across the meadow toward him from the east. It was Pinto Man. He immediately sensed what he had to do. He reached up and pulled the front of the circular stone down

over him there in the hole. He left no more than inch-wide crack through which he could view the entire area outside. The man stopped his horse no more than ten yards away. He looked the area over for some time staying in the saddle, moving left with his horse and then right on with his horse. He took his rifle from its place beside his saddle and dismounted.

He walked the area, looking up, looking down, looking back and forth. He spoke, calling out with his hand beside his mouth.

“Boy. You here? Boy. I’ve decided to let you set your price for that belt. You give me a price and I’ll either take it or leave it.”

Johnny wondered: Take the price or take the belt?

He repeated the message several times. Johnny sat tight. Several things seemed to fall into place. The man was there to look for *him* not the place the gold had been buried. It made Johnny think the meaning of the symbols meant nothing to him – it only identified the belt that he knew held the Bearer Bond, which was, by that time, well on its way to Kansas City. At some point, he had tracked him to the Red Mountains, probably when he was with Doc. He must have thought it was his regular play area and really *had* come just to try and buy – or obtain in some other way – the belt. Who knew what he might do if Johnny again refused to sell it?

Johnny was having no part of it. He’d wait. He hoped the man would leave before six or his aunt would become worried. It was getting close.

Apparently satisfied that Johnny wasn’t there, the man remounted his Pinto and moved off on a trot toward the east, away from town. Once he was a good fifty yards away Johnny climbed out of his hiding place and replaced a few of the rocks toward the front to hold the big circular rock in place. He climbed down off the hill, but crouched to keep low and out of sight. He wanted to make sure the man was not going to circle back and try to trick him. He wondered if he had stopped by his house earlier. He worried that he might have hurt his aunt in an attempt to find him.

There was tall grass and brush on the property to the west of Mae’s. He made his way there and continuing to keep low soon found himself in his own backyard. He slipped in the

back door right at six o'clock.

He washed up and helped his aunt set the food on the table. She didn't mention anything about the man. He figured she would have if he had stopped there. Relieved, he enjoyed the meal and conversation. Mae had stories about Doc as a boy – and of the Marshal. It was cause for many smiles and chuckles. Boys seemed to be boys regardless of the era in which they grew up.

Johnny hadn't had time to plan how to break the news to his aunt about the gold so he chose to remain silent about it. He was certain it was safe – if he and Doc hadn't been able to find it he doubted if anybody else could. And, better yet, the only other possible contender for it – Pinto Man – apparently really didn't even know about it. Still, he planned to get into town at dawn to let the sheriff know about his find and ask for his assistance in handling it.

He did have a question for his aunt.

“Just how far back does this property go? There's no fence or any apparent boundary marker.”

“That's because it would have to span the upper crest of the mountains. The property line is the high point along the hills. Doubt if a fence could even be constructed up there in the rock. The folks on the other side of the Red Mountains have the same southern border as my northern border.”

“So, anything on this side – the southern slope – is your land, your property?” Johnny asked just to make sure he understood.

“That's correct. Why you ask?”

Really, of course, he was wondering if the gold was actually on her property. If not, ownership might be a problem. He gave her an honest if not complete answer.

“Oh, I've been climbing around out there and just wanted to know whose land I was on – didn't want to bother anybody if I was really trespassing.”

“You stay on this side and you'll be just fine. I know they won't mind if you explore their side as well. Their name is Jackson. Fine folks. Own one of the few small ranches left in this area.”

“You mean they haven't sold out to Kendal yet.”

“That's right. You know about Kendal, do you?”

“Hard to spend time around Cilla and not learn lots more than you may want to.”

“If it happens within fifty miles of here she will know about it, for sure.”

Before they had finished dinner, the rain began just like she had predicted. Mabel was safe in the barn. The chickens would find a way to fend for themselves. It grew cool – a nice thing. They sat on the front porch for a long time enjoying the rain and lightning. Mae recalled similar times from when she was a girl and told about how frightened she had been of the lightning.

Johnny noticed she still jumped a bit at the louder claps of thunder.

He was in bed early, so he could get into town at the crack of dawn.

Johnny had arranged his early departure with his aunt and tried not to disturb her. He fixed himself scrambled eggs, a slab of ham and toast and was out of the house by five thirty, well ahead of his aunt’s usual rising time.

He kept a lookout for Pinto Man. He couldn’t believe if the man really knew what the belt had contained – the Bond – that he was the type that would just give up and ride away. He figured the next step would be some sort of physical confrontation – trying to take it or trying to force him to go get it for him. Johnny still carried the whistle, but that wouldn’t be worth a whole lot except while he was in town.

He arrived to a deserted Main Street. He was all by himself – no people, no horses, not even one of the four or five dozen dogs. It hadn’t entered his head that the Marshal wouldn’t be in his office at that hour. The deputy said he’d be in at seven. He had an hour to kill.

Johnny didn’t know where Cilla lived and he wouldn’t bother Doc. Doc always needed sleep when he could catch it. Feeling uneasy being alone with Pinto Man on the prowl he stuck close to the front of the Marshal’s office and played *mumbly peg* [look up] with his knife in the hard-packed dirt street. He was very good at throwing his pocket knife and could hit most any target he set his mind to if it were within twenty feet. His father had encouraged it and praised him for his skill. His mother had warned him about the danger – over



and over again. He smiled at the memories. Parents!

The Marshal arrived right at seven and asked Johnny if he'd had breakfast.

"Sort of," Johnny said not sure where the Marshal intended the question to go.

"Come along with me. I usually eat at the R & B Restaurant. Got to keep a growing boy growing."

On the way across the street Johnny shared his latest news with the Marshal asking for advice about how to proceed. The Marshal said he would take it up with Mr. Yeager, the banker. He would have the best advice to give on such a matter.

"You're absolutely certain he can be trusted not to tell anybody about any of this, right?" Johnny asked.

"Absolutely. That worry you?"

"Yes. I don't want anybody here in town to know I'm rich. I've seen it before. When people think somebody's rich they treat them different – not like a regular person, you know. I really want people to treat me just like regular person because that's what I am. I'm determined not to let any amount of money change that."

"I do understand and you can be certain nobody will ever hear about that from any of us here who know about it. That's strictly your business."

Johnny felt better with that assurance and 'forced' himself to down another breakfast. He was amazed at how much the Marshal could put away – a steak, four eggs, grits, six pieces of toast and cup after cup of coffee. With that finished, Cal patted his tummy and asked:

"Now, how about a piece of pie? I love pie to finish off a good breakfast."

Not be outdone or seem unmanly, Johnny put away a piece of mixed berry with whipped cream on top. In all honesty, he had to force the final several bites down, but he managed, all the time managing to keep a big grin on his face.

Before they left, Doc entered and spotted them. He approached their table.

"Morning early birds," he said.

The Marshal stood and excused himself.

"I'll take that matter up with Mr. Yeager as soon as the

bank opens, Johnny. Later, Doc.”

Doc took a seat. Johnny stayed.

“More high finance?” Doc asked.

“I’ll say.”

He leaned in very close and whispered, relating his find and explaining how the Marshal was going to enlist the assistance of the banker.

Doc nodded suggesting that he agreed with the Marshal’s plan. He also said it was going to be difficult keeping it quiet, if an armored wagon was required to come and pick it up from where it was hidden.

“I’m glad you mentioned that. I’ll have to figure a way to avoid any publicity.”

He repeated to Doc his fears about being known as a rich person. Doc said essentially the same thing to him the Marshal had – that none of the folks who knew about it would ever let the cat out of the bag.

Johnny relaxed about it. If he couldn’t trust Doc, Cilla, Aunt Mae, the Marshal and the bank president he figured he couldn’t trust anybody.

It was as if he weren’t supposed to enjoy even a short moment of relaxation. Pinto Man entered the restaurant. Again, in a whisper, Johnny explained to Doc who he was.

The man looked around the room and spotted Johnny, though he didn’t acknowledge him. He sat at the counter close to the door and ordered, but he *had* spotted him. They would have to pass him to leave. Johnny felt in his pocket for the whistle.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: Best Shot by a Long Shot!**

Doc motioned to the waitress. He wrote a quick note on a pad he carried. He whispered to her as he tore off the single sheet.

“Get this to the Marshal quickly. He may be at the bank. Leave through the back door. Don’t let on you’re leaving.”

She understood. She filled his coffee and did the same at several other tables on her way to the kitchen. Doc had delivered both of her children and felt quite sure she would do exactly as he had asked.

A few minutes later she reappeared at the kitchen door and nodded. A few minutes after that the Marshal appeared at the front door and pretended to see Doc and Johnny for the first time that morning. He walked toward them and took a seat.

He spoke in low tones.

“The man at the counter?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do.”

He looked at Johnny.

“You and I will get up, say goodbye to Doc and head for the front door. I’ll have some things to say when we pass him. You just play along.”

They followed the plan and paused right behind the man who clearly made an effort to hunch down trying not to be seen. The Marshal began.

“Well, son, we need to get you back out the practice

range this morning. I think today we'll work on draw and soot. You're good, but you can always improve."

"Sounds, great, pop. I only hit seven out of ten last time. I'm looking to improve that some today."

The point if the conversation, of course, had been to make the man think he was dealing with the Marshal's son so he would think twice about bothering him.

They moved on. Once outside Johnny let go of the huge giggle that he'd been holding inside.

"You did great, *Pop*."

"No *son* of mine ever did better, Johnny."

"They crossed the street to the Marshal's office."

"Doesn't seem like Pinto Man is giving up very easily," the Marshal said.

"His actions tell me that he knows about the bond in the belt, but not the code on the belt."

"I think you're right, Johnny. Still, men have done bad things for a whole lot less than \$20,000."

"What did Mr. Yeager at the bank have to say?"

"He had a good suggestion. We bring the ingots in one at a time by horseback or buggy over a period of days. He'll keep armed guards inside the bank while they are here. He says if you want to convert it into money you will need to go through the mint in Denver. They buy gold for the Treasury Department. No individuals would be in a financial position to buy that amount. If I were you, I'd let him handle all the details. He'll charge a fee, but it will be tiny in terms of the worth of the gold."

"I'll make that suggestion to my lawyer and let the two of them work it out. That sound alright?"

"It sounds *just* right."

"It's buried on my Aunt's land you know. I suppose that helps make it mine legally."

"It does. When Judge Talbert comes through next week we'll run it past him and be sure everything about it is legal."

"Thanks for all your help. I'll tell you like I told Doc; if you ever need my help for anything, you just ask. That's anything, you hear me?"

He waited for a response.

"I understand and I assure you, if I need something I'll

come to you.”

Johnny changed the subject.

“I noticed Aunt Mae had the rifle standing by the front door when I got home from town yesterday. You tell her to do that?”

“No. I’m sure she understands things aren’t all as they should be. She’d protect you with her life, you know.”

“I’m coming to understand that. She’s a good person. You think she’s alright for money. She never talks about it.”

“Her father owned a ranch and when he died she sold off the cattle and horses and invested it in the railroad. It was a pretty shrewd investment and she’ll have plenty to take care of herself for the rest of her days. She didn’t sell the property – about four hundred acres west of town. If I was a guessin’ man I’d say that’ll all be yours someday.”

“Mine! I just keep getting things I don’t want. I sure don’t want to be a rancher. You want to ranch? If you do you can have it when it comes to me.”

“At the rate your Aunt is still going at seventy I just imagine that decision is still well down the road.”

Johnny grew quiet and sat in a chair looking out the front window. The Marshal attended to paper work at his desk. Eventually, Johnny had a question.

“Do you suppose Aunt Mae knows how to use that rifle if push comes to shove?”

“I can guarantee you she knows how to use it. Sometime you look that rifle over real close.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, if you do as I said.”

Johnny nodded.

Pinto Man rode by. He was heading east. Johnny pointed it out to the Marshal.

“I guess I’ll give him time to get on down the road a few miles than I’ll head back home. Do you know when that big card game is to begin down in Dodge?”

“Next week. Begins Sunday morning and just keeps going until somebody has all the money.”

“How much money, do you suppose?”

“I hear the buy-in amount is five thousand.”

“Wow! That’s a life’s wages for a lot of folks here in

Red Bend.”

“It’s a lot of money, for sure,” the Marshal said. “He’ll need to be getting on his way if he’s going to be there Sunday morning. I hope that means we’ve seen the last of him.”

What Johnny heard was, if he wants that Bearer Bond in order to make the buy-in, he’ll move quickly and do whatever it takes to get it from me.

“I think I’ll take the belt back, Marshal. It’s empty so there’s nothing to be stolen. I’ve found the ingots so I don’t need to protect the symbols. Pinto Man’s leaving. Seems safe to wear it again, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

He tossed Johnny the key to the cell and he was soon struggling into it – the loops really were almost too small.

“Guess I’ll be on my way. Thanks again for breakfast. Doesn’t seem right for me to be taking handouts considering my financial situation.”

“I got you breakfast because I wanted to get you breakfast. It had nothing to do with money – yours or mine. You have to get that sort of thinking out of your head. You want to be treated like a regular person. That’s how we’re treating you.”

It came out in a sterner fashion than the Marshal had intended, but it took that to make his point. Johnny nodded.

“Thanks for that. I needed to hear that. Thanks. I may be back in town later on. Oh, do you know where Clarabelle lives? Of course, you do. You’re the Marshal. For some reason my head tends to go south (become inoperative) when I think about her.”

The Marshal smiled understanding how it was to be a thirteen-year-old boy ‘in like’ for the first time.

“The blacksmith’s daughter? They live two doors north of the blacksmith’s shop. You’ll recognize it because there will probably be five, large, older brothers wrestling in the lawn.”

Johnny gulped.

“A black smith for a father and five older brothers. It’s like taking my life in my hands just to look at her from across the street.”

“Be nice to her and they’ll be nice to you. It’s a good family. Just consider their last name.”

“I guess I don’t even know it.”

“Goodfellow.”

Johnny grinned.

“I’ll remind them of that if they should become upset at me.”

He left. He belt was actually somewhat uncomfortable and looked a bit odd, being a good foot longer than his other belt. He had rolled the old one up and slipped it into his rear pants pocket for the trip home.

Again, he walked. The air was relatively dust free after the rain the night before. The grass looked greener although he realized it was just because the dust had been washed away. Summer in central Kansas was always dusty – not even a rain could change that for long. Winters were another thing – snow and cold winds. He figured the weather would be whatever the weather would be so he’d not fret over it.

He was about fifty yards from the house. He could see it in the distance. The chimney from the cook stove in the kitchen showed smoke – a sure sign his aunt was baking something.

“Stop right there, kid!” came a deep voice from just behind him.

Johnny turned and found himself standing face to face with Pinto Man. He held a derringer in his right hand. [Derringer was a very small hand gun often carried by gamblers and women because it was easily concealed.] It was a two-barrel model – top and bottom; that meant two shots. Johnny knew they were only accurate at very close range. He was, however, standing there at *very* close range.

“Give me your belt!”

“May I ask why you want it? It’s all tattered and quite ugly.”

“None of your business. Take it off, now!”

The man was standing with his back to the east – the sun behind him, tending to blind Johnny who was facing him.

He unbuckled the belt and slowly worked it out of his trousers. He held it out, showing how the stitching had been cut – proving that it was indeed tattered (and, more importantly, empty). The man grabbed it and became enraged. He took a step backward and extended his arm

pulling the gun up level with Johnny's chest.

At virtually the same moment Johnny heard a shot ring out and saw the derringer flip out of the man's hand, landing ten feet to the south. They both looked north toward the house. There stood Mae, the rifle still aimed in their direction. She walked toward them.

"If I were you, sir, I'd put my hands up. That lady has no patience whatsoever. You're just fortunate she didn't try to take your hat off with that shot. When she misses, she misses low."

He raised his hands immediately, his right hand in pain from the way the gun had been twisted out of it.

Mae arrived with an immediate order for the man.

"Lay across your saddle on your stomach. Now!"

He took the position, stomach on the saddle, arms draping down the north side, legs down the south.

"Tie his arms to his legs together under the horse's belly," she said to Johnny.

Johnny's grin wouldn't stop. His aunt had hit a little derringer from fifty yards away. There would be stories he'd have to hear. She continued.

"Lead the horse into town to the Marshal. You can carry the rifle, but remember last time you kept your finger on the trigger and almost killed the horse. You be more careful this time. Can't hang a man if he's dead."

Johnny nodded, fighting back a smile, understanding the ruse (deception). He took the gun from his aunt and gathered the reins. He took his time getting into town feeling like a triumphant warrior heading to receive a hero's welcome from his tribe

Eyes did turn in his direction as he entered Main Street. A small band of young children were soon following along behind. Johnny took out his whistle and blew one long, shrill, blast. The Marshal was quickly out onto the street. He stopped short and removed his hat, scratching his head as he watched the odd procession move in his direction."

"What in tarnation?" he said as Johnny stopped a few feet in front of him.

Johnny pulled out the derringer from where he had been carrying it under his belt at his waist. He handed it and



the reins to the Marshal.

“Pinto Man here pulled his gun on me and demanded my belt. Aunt Mae blew the derringer out of his hand from fifty yards away and suggested the way I should wrap him up for delivery to you. I’m sure there are enough charges to hold him until the judge comes to town next week, aren’t there – robbery, threatening bodily harm, intent to kill?”

“Way more than enough.”

The Marshal did a two-finger whistle and a deputy hurried out of the office and took charge of the man and horse.

“You should have seen my Aunt Mae, Marshal. Fifty yards away if one. One shot. The derringer went flying. I still can’t believe it.”

The marshal pointed to a brass plate on the butt of the gun the boy was carrying. Johnny held it up and read.

*“This Winchester rifle is presented to Miss Mae Madigan as first place prize in the 1870, Annual Red Bend Turkey Shoot.”*

Aunt Mae beat out the men?”

“By a long shot.” [In shooting competition, the targets were moved ever further away until only one shooter hit it – thus, the term *by a long shot*.]

With Pinto Man – come to find out his name was Wesley Sales – behind bars, the conversation turned to other things.

“Anything ever come of that lead on Kendal’s man and the Newspaper office?” Johnny asked.

“I confronted Kendal and he said somebody had stolen the neckerchief a week before the vandalism. I’m sure he’d have a dozen hands all swear to the truth of it so it was a nowhere lead.”

“I suppose he may wonder about my story about seeing his hired gun drop it.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. He sees you as a little kid and unfortunately too many folks don’t appreciate what kids your age can accomplish.”

Johnny nodded. It gave him an idea.

“New topic,” Johnny said. “I’ve been wondering why one or both of the Tuttles never came back for the gold. It’s been forty some years. I have a theory that soon after leaving

here they got into big trouble with the law and were in prison for a long time. Since Tuttle surfaced in a poker game in New Orleans, I'm wondering if that's where he got into trouble and only recently got out of jail. Anyway to find out about that?"

"I can make an inquiry through the Marshal's Service. It's probably a long shot."

"And another thing," Johnny continued. "I'm betting that Bearer Bond belonged to Dupree. I read that money for the Confederacy coming from Northern sympathizers, was often in the form of Bearer Bonds. Confederate spies also often used the double belt trick to carry secret messages. If Dupree was coming all the way from New Orleans to Dodge City to play a high stakes game, he wouldn't have carried that kind of cash on him, would he?"

"I doubt it," the Marshal said. "I see where you're going. Carry the Bond in the belt and cash it in once he arrived in Dodge. Clever. A real possibility. Why show up in Red Bend, then?"

"Like I told somebody, I figure if he took the belt in payment of a poker debt he had to have been quite sure it would lead to a good deal of money. Tuttle must have told him about the stash of gold. There may have been some extra guarantee like threatening to kill him or his son if it wasn't true."

"You do spin a good tale, I'll give you that. It sure could have come down that way, I suppose. Doubt if we'll ever know. I'll get a telegram off about the Tuttles' incarceration (detention) in Louisiana."

"Thanks, Marshal. I better check on Doc and Cilla then head back home. Aunt Mae will be wondering how things went."

He crossed the street to the newspaper office.

"Hey, Cilla. Anything new on the vandalism or the articles? The Marshal told me about Kendal's alibi for his man, Tourane."

"Hey, yourself. I've been sending out inquiries about the ranchers who sold out. I received two interesting responses. One from a man named, Carson – the son of one of the ranchers who Kendal bought out. He said his father had stolen a horse as a young man – that was a hanging offense

back then – and somehow Kendal found out and threatened to bring witnesses if he didn't sell for ten percent of what the ranch was worth. He had no alternative but to sell.

"Another, named Davidson, said that some stolen cattle had been mixed in within his herd – he thinks by Kendal – and it was threatened that the authorities would be brought in that very day if he didn't sell."

"So, what's your next step, Cilla?"

"I'm printing the two men's stories. Davidson says he has since found one of Kendal's former cowhands that confirms that he not only helped rustle the cattle, but also helped mix them in with the Davidson herd."

"You have anything from him?"

"Not yet, but I've tracked him down to Wichita and a newspaper friend of mine over there is looking for him. If he finds him, he'll try to get a statement and I'll run that as a sidebar. You understand, sidebar?"

"Yes, a separate but related story printed alongside the main story. Of course, you know you're asking for terrible trouble – especially since a man like Kendal is involved."

"It's what the fourth estate (journalists, newspapers) is supposed to be about – bringing the truth to the attention of the public."

"I understand that, but is it worth losing your paper?"

"The paper is in here, Johnny."

She pointed to her heart.

"The type can be destroyed. The presses can be smashed. The building can be burned. But the paper – and the truth it represents – is bigger than any of that."

"Aren't you afraid for your own safety?"

"Let's see. I run stories that can put Kendal in jail and then I get attacked. Suppose that connection just might seem pretty obvious?"

"It would, but there's such a thing as getting to the point where all a person may think he can do is to take down his enemy with him – you being the enemy in this case."

"That's a point well taken. One I often choose to overlook. Your place is not to be worrying about the old warhorse, here. I've run up against worse in my day. I'll handle this one."

Johnny saw he wasn't going to change her thinking, so he made small talk for a while and then left to pop in on Doc. He expressed his concerns about Cilla to him.

"She's a woman with a mind of her own, Johnny. I've been right where you are with her a dozen times and I'll assure you it's a losing battle. Cilla will do what Cilla will do."

The conversation had not been in any way reassuring. Johnny needed to think. He needed a diversion. He found himself at the blacksmith's shop. That man knew him by name – he wondered how.

"I'm not sure how you know my name, sir."

He laid down his huge hammer and put his foot up on a bench and leaned forward, becoming quite confidential in tone.

"Your name comes up frequently at meals at our house."

"I don't understand."

"Let me try this another way. There is somebody at my house who seems to be interested in you."

"Joe? I see him at church and we talk sometimes. Seems like a good kid. We just don't have many interests in common."

"Let me be *more* direct. Clarabelle thinks you are the cutest boy in town and seems to be keeping track of your coming and going. Of course, I'm her father so I might be biased, but I think she'd be a pretty good catch for a guy like you."

"Catch?"

Johnny was *really* dumb when it came to girls.

"She'd like to be your special friend – girl friend. You do know about girlfriends, don't you?"

"Oh! I suppose I just seemed *really* dumb about it, didn't I? I haven't had much experience in that area. I think she has the prettiest smile I've ever seen and she has hair and she's always so clean."

He wondered if he should dig a hole right there and crawl in. She has hair? She's clean? Dumb. Dumb. Dumb, he thought.

The big man put his hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"She's at home. You just might want to walk by. If you

see her out, you just might want to speak to her. Boy. Girl. Talking. All that's really good."

"Thank you, sir. Sorry I've seemed like such a dunce (stupid person). Like I said, I really don't know anything about girls."

"And you won't if you don't get up the courage to talk to one."

"Thank you again, sir."

He turned to leave. The big man had one more piece of advice.

"I think it's best if you don't mention this talk to her. Alright?"

The big man winked. Johnny smiled and nodded.

"And what talk would that be, sir?"

The big man smiled back and watched the boy walk down the street, a noticeable spring developing in the young man's step.

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## **CHAPTER NINE: Good Usually Wins in the End**

Johnny finger-combed his hair and tried to smell his breath and his armpits. He shrugged to himself. He was what he was. She would either like it or she wouldn't. He would not pretend to be something he wasn't even for the girl with the prettiest smile in town.

He stopped in front of the house. Two older boys rounded from the back into the front yard. Neither one was Joe, but Johnny figured they were her older brothers – her very large, older brothers. His own next move absolutely amazed him. He opened his mouth and words came out.

“Hi. I’m Johnny and I’d like to see Clair if she’s here.”

‘My,’ he thought, ‘that went very well. But, where in the world did it come from?’

The younger of the two brothers called into the house.

“That Johnny kid is here asking for you, sis.”

It took longer than seemed reasonable, but eventually she appeared and walked out to the street to meet him.

“I’ve been wanting to see you,” Johnny said. “Been really busy since I got here. I like your town. I like the people. I like your father’s blacksmith shop. I tend to run off at the mouth like this when I’m nervous and I’m really nervous.”

“I’m glad you stopped by. Mom says we can walk down to grandmas and back if you want to.”

“Sure.”

Of course, he had no idea if grandma lived in the next house or down in Dodge City, but he’d take whatever he could get. It seemed to be going well, he thought.

Grandma lived three blocks down the street near the northern edge of town. They walked slowly. Clair turned out to be very good at conversation. Johnny surprised himself at how good he was at it. He was amazed that, in many ways, girls were almost like real people. When she reached her hand out to take his, all he could think about were those two huge brothers. He'd risk it. It was very nice. Her hands were soft. His were rough. He hoped she didn't mind.

"Your hand is very soft," he said.

"Your hand is very manly."

'Not rough, but manly,' he thought. 'That can't be so bad.'

They walked up and down the street for most of a half hour. She talked a lot. He didn't have to do much other than agree now and then. She seemed to know when it was time for her to go back inside. She thanked him for stopping by and said she hoped he would stop again. He watched her cross the lawn back to the house.

Her brothers approached him. They had been throwing a knife at a short stick they had pounded into the ground. Johnny had watched earlier. The object of the game seemed to be to see who could get the knife closest to the stick from various distances away.

"Why don't *you* try?" the older brother said taking a step closer to Johnny.

His tone sounded smug as if he were quite sure the kid from the city would have no idea how to play.

"Sure. I'll play. I think your problem is that you are standing way too close to the stick."

The brothers looked at each other and frowned. They were no more than eight feet away. Johnny took out his own knife. He opened it to the longest blade as if doing so thoughtfully. He backed up to ten feet away. He backed up to twelve feet away. He backed up to fifteen feet away.

His throwing style began by grasping the blade about a third of the way in from the point with the handle sticking straight up. He held it high and moved it forward and back several times taking aim. He let fly with a good deal of power. It split the stick from top to bottom.

With that one act, during that summer of 1880, Johnny



had gained instant celebrity status among the boys in Red Bend, Kansas. The impression it made on the girl with the pretty smile who had been watching from behind the curtain in the front window also turned out to be a very good thing.

He began spending more time in town with the young people and usually managed some time with Clair.

“Where you been keeping yourself?” Doc asked as he entered his office.

“Spending lots of time with the kids. You have a town full of really nice guys.”

“Just guys?”

“And Clair. I think she really likes me. I like her. We hold hands and talk when we walk.”

He had just summarized the full extent of his love life to Doc.

“It sounds like life is good?”

His tone made it a question.

“Yes. Life is good – not how I would really want it to be you understand, but good.”

Doc sniffed. Cilla would have cried. Johnny smiled.

“The kids and I are really worried about Cilla. Did you read the paper this morning?”

“Yes. She’s really going after Kendal. Like I said, she’s a war horse.”

“I saw Tex Tourane in town this morning,” Johnny said.

“Was he with Kendal?”

“No, but I think he was with three other men. I’ve never seen them before. Have the look of cowhands. Not classy like Tourane.”

“Better mention it to the Marshal.”

“I already did. Has the stage come in yet?”

“Should have – half hour ago.”

“I’m expecting a package. I better go check. Need anything?”

“I think I have my life fairly well under control.”

Johnny grinned at the response and left.

On his way to the stage office, he stopped in to see the Marshal and ask about picking up the rifle to take home. The Marshal had already sent it out to Mae with a deputy. He was, however, happy to see Johnny.

"You're just the boy I wanted to see. Something came for you with the stage today."

"You mean my package, *on* the stage?"

"No. I mean something came *with* the stage. Follow me."

Johnny was puzzled, but like most boys his age he liked surprises. They headed toward the stage corral, which sat across the alley from the Newspaper office. That only added more puzzlement to his already growing puzzlement.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I sent for a friend of yours a couple of weeks back. He arrived just a few minutes ago."

"You really have me going, Marshal. None of my friends' parents would let them travel way out here by stagecoach."

About twenty yards from the corral the Marshal stopped and pointed. Johnny looked. Johnny smiled. Johnny let a few tears roll down his cheeks.

"Diablo! You brought Diablo to me."

He ran to the fence, and was immediately up and over it. The horse hurried in his direction. The next few minutes were filled with a lot of nuzzling and whinnying (from Diablo, not Johnny). In one well practiced move Johnny took hold of Diablo's mane and swung himself up onto his back. In another apparently well practiced move, Diablo and Johnny jumped the fence and were on the gallop up to Main Street and back. When they returned, Johnny slid off and administered a world class hug to the Marshal. It was not the way the Marshal was used to being greeted, but he allowed it.

"This is just the greatest thing ever. I don't know how to thank you. I've missed him every day we've been away from each other. I've got to get him set up at the livery stable. I don't have money to do that."

"Well, actually you do. Mr. Yeager set up a small account for you in his bank with some of the money from the Bearer Bond. That's another piece of good news. The Bond has been cashed and is in the bank your lawyer selected in Kansas City. He saw to it that this account was established for you. I have already reserved a stall at the livery. I assumed you'd eventually want to take him out to your place."

“Yes. That’s where he belongs. He really trotted along with the stage all that way?”

“He did. That’s a prime piece of horse flesh you have there. Haven’t seen one as good in many years.

“Dad was that way about things. He used to say, ‘first class or no class’. All I know is he’s a great horse.”

“Why don’t you let him rest here in town for a few days after his long journey, then you can take him out to Mae’s – excuse me – to *your* place.”

Johnny grinned up into the Marshal’s face and nodded.

“Sounds good. Can I take him to the livery now?”

“He’s your horse, son. You do with him as you please.”

It was another one of those moments that told Johnny he was being seen as something other than just a little kid – not a man, but a man in the making and that really felt good.

Once Diablo was settled in at the livery stable, Johnny stopped at the newspaper office just for a ‘hi and goodbye’ sort of moment with Cilla. He could hardly wait to get home and share all his good news with his Aunt. That was the moment he realized she had become the most important person in his life. It was wonderful to have a most important person in his life again. For a time, just a short while before, he was sure that would never be possible for him again.

He had several other short errands to run and was soon trotting toward home.

He shared his news with his aunt at the kitchen table over a half dozen sugar cookies and milk. She listened attentively and commented at appropriate points. She understood it was his very important story to tell and she would not interrupt with any of the dozens of questions she had. There would be for them later.

He asked if he could camp out by the creek that night – it was clear and warm and just right for a night under the stars. He also had another motive.

His aunt agreed and packed him the lunch of all lunches in a large, soft, leather pouch with a strap that he slung across his shoulder. He gathered his bed roll and a few other things and was off on the trot by five thirty.

He had scouted a spot that he thought would be ideal on a grassy area surrounded by bushes and several trees of

various heights. Just upstream was an area of white water (water splashing over large rocks) which provided what he thought was one of nature's most soothing sounds. Even though it was still warm, he started a small fire. He liked the smell of wood smoke. Back in Kansas City the houses burned coal which gave off awful smelling smoke. It was one of the real advantages of rural Kansas life.

In mid-July, it didn't get really dark until around nine o'clock. Johnny snacked on the lunch – cold fried chicken, backed beans, carrot strips, and a few baby onions. There was half a loaf of homemade bread with a hard crust – he loved that – and a quart jar of her home packed tomato juice.

It was nice to have some time alone. He thought back about how it had been in Kansas City. He relived the stage coach ride – most of which had been wonderful and exciting. He looked forward to riding Diablo again. He was becoming comfortable with the young people and decided he had put off getting to know them because it had been so hard to leave his friends back in the city. But, once he came to accept the fact that Red Bend was going to be his home for the next five years or so – until he went off to college – he became ready for new friends.

He had four really fine adults in his life. Each one offered a slightly different side of life and he thought that was good. Doc was the scientist and best educated. He took nothing at face value, but always looked for other possible explanations or alternatives. He loved to learn new things. Johnny loved to learn new things. Cilla, for all her impatience with the bad guys of the world, showed nothing but great patience with Johnny. She was a great writer and she seemed pleased to help him with his writing. He hoped to someday be thought of as a great writer, also. The Marshal, with only an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, knew a whole lot about people and was the most respected lawman north of Dodge City. He was fair minded and able to make good decisions on the spur of the moment. He knew a lot about things a boy Johnny's age was interested in – guns, horses, camping out, and things like that. And Aunt Mae. Girls didn't usually go to college back when she was young, but she had read enough to have two degrees. She was a gentle person and somehow

seemed to sense exactly what Johnny needed at almost every moment he'd been with her. She was his source of unconditional love – he knew it would be there regardless of what he did or didn't do. All four of them understood that making mistakes was a valuable part of growing up and used his blunders and miscalculations to help him grow and become a better person. None of them would have ever considered punishing him for them.

His father and mother had been good, kind, hardworking people, but the closer he grew to the new adults in his life the more he understood that what had really been important to his parents – nice things, money, position in the community, and power – played no real place in being a happy, helpful, truly respected human being. He wouldn't fault his parents for being the way they were. He just felt fortunate that his life was giving him a chance to examine other ways of becoming a good, helpful, happy person.

He reclined in the soft grass using his bed roll like a pillow. He looked into the darkening sky, watching an ever-increasing number of stars begin peeking down on him. It brought lots of big questions to mind – the kind of questions he figured would probably not be answered in his lifetime – how big was the universe, how many stars and planets were there, was there another planet that was home to intelligent beings, would man ever be able to fly up into space – visit the moon or the other planets?

For many of his questions he could find answers in books or by asking the people in his life. For many, answers were not yet available. He decided that was alright. People seemed to need unanswered questions and problems in order to grow and become more than they had been before those things had come into their lives.

Eventually, he realized it was nearly dark. He stowed his bedroll and pouch in the bushes and headed to town. He felt a twinge of guilt for not have given his Aunt the full accounting of his plans for the night, but pushed it to the back of his mind.

He had the feeling, supported by Tourane's presence in town with a couple of thugs, that it was the night Kendal just might move against Cilla. He couldn't let that happen – at

least he couldn't let that be successful.

Earlier, he had set a plan in motion. He kept to the alleys and soon found himself on the roof of the Coach maintenance building beside the corral, which sat thirty yards behind the Newspaper office. From there he could see up and down the alley and had a full view of the back of the newspaper building – and, Doc's place, of course.

While he kept watch, he also cut the top several inches off a candle he had brought with him. It exposed a three-inch wick. He waxed the wick thoroughly with some of the candle he had cut away. Once lit, it would burn very brightly for thirty seconds or so before the top of the wick burned away. He readied several wooden matches.

From his vantage point he could see lots of activity in the shadows below, between the buildings, on the roof across on Main Street. Clearly, it didn't bother him.

He waited. Eleven o'clock came and went. Midnight, came and went. At one o'clock he saw what he had expected. Five men on horseback turned into the alley behind the Newspaper office. They stopped behind the building and tied their horses to the posts at the corral. They each untied a four-foot-long stick – three or so inches thick – from their saddles and crossed to just behind the newspaper building.

Almost immediately, five torches (the long sticks wrapped in tar at one end) were lit. It took such a torch a good minute or two to become completely engulfed in flame. Johnny lit the candle he had prepared and stood up, waving it back and forth above his head. The men below had their backs to him.

Immediately a hundred metal whistles began blowing. They had come in the package Johnny was expecting on the stage. He had seen that most of the kids in town got one and had set the plan with them. They had taken positions near the Newspaper office. When Johnny spied the men who he felt sure would come – not knowing of course they were intent on burning the building – he would give the signal with his candle. The others would blow the whistles. It would awaken every man in town who, at that time of night, would automatically grab a gun and go out onto the street to investigate.

Two of Clair's brothers offered to remove the vandal's

horses so they had no means of escape. The men were rounded up before a single torch had been thrown at the building.

Johnny had understood ahead of time that none of the adults would have approved of his plan so he had added a second part. Once the men of the town had things under control, the kids would hurry home and get back into bed. There would be no proof of their participation.

It turned out even better than Johnny had figured it would. That fifth man in the group had been Kendal himself caught red handed with a torch right alongside his hired hands. The visiting judge was going to have a very busy schedule while in Red Bend.

The next morning, after touching base with his aunt, Johnny went to town – to see Diablo, of course. As was his custom, he stopped first at the Marshal's office.

"So, anything new around town," Johnny asked.

The Marshal's tone was stern.

"As if you don't know, young man."

He turned back toward the cells.

"I think you know Tex Tourane. That's his boss, William Kendal. The other three are his cowhands. They were caught playing with fire way too close to Cilla's place early this morning."

He didn't mention the eardrum shattering din of whistle noise that had alerted the town. Johnny reached into his front pocket and removed his whistle.

"I guess with all the bad guys in jail, I won't be needing this anymore, Marshal. Thanks for its use. I felt much safer knowing I had it on me."

The Marshal accepted it and tossed it into his desk drawer. He had a question for the boy.

"Why does Red Bend have a Marshal?"

"To enforce the laws of the community – often as a result of having been alerted by good citizens to some illegal activity being perpetrated by one – or five – bad guys."

The answer had not led exactly to the place the Marshal had thought it would, but he accepted it with a smile – it had in every way defined the proper relationship between the residents and the law enforcement agent they employed.

The marshal offered his hand. Johnny accepted it and they shook – almost man to man.

“By the way, I heard back from the Marshal’s service and your hunch about the Tuttle’s was right. They’ve been serving sentences in Louisiana for armed robbery and murder. The father was released about six months ago, for medical reasons – has a lung disorder that will soon take his life. The boy’s serving life so I don’t imagine either one will come looking for the gold.”

“That’s good to know. Thank you and anybody else that needs thanking. It’s more of a relief than I realized.”

He left to visit Cilla.

She was working at the long table.

“Morning, Newspaper Woman of the Year.”

“What?”

“The kids of Red Bend sent your name to the newspaper society, nominating you for the recognition. I think you’re a shoo-in (sure thing).”

“Having Kendal behind bars is enough for me. Just in case you had anything to do with it, you have my eternal gratitude.”

“Me? Catch bad guys? Come now. I’m just a kid.”

“Sure, you are, like Paddy Ryan is just a run of the mill street fighter.” [Paddy Ryan won the heavyweight boxing title from Joe Goss in the 87th round of a grueling fight in 1880 when Goss was unable to continue.]

Johnny was soon upstairs.

“Doc. Johnny, here,” he called ahead as he entered.

He wasn’t greeted in the way he had anticipated. Doc walked out of his bed room arms on his hips.

“That was the lamest brained, riskiest, most dangerous, chanciest, downright stupidest undertaking in the entire history of thirteen old boys.”

Johnny’s mouth dropped open. Doc continued.

“And I truly thank you for saving my life last night. I’d say any debt you ever felt toward me has been repaid in full.”

“Not sure what you’re talking about, Doc, but if there’s any truth to your contention you are welcome. I have been known to walk in my sleep.”

“Yes, I know. Walk and whistle and catch bad guys!”



\* \* \*

The gold ingots were transferred from their hiding place in the Red Mountains to the bank and from there to the mint in Denver.

Johnny's bank account **g r e W**.

In August, an anonymous donor gave the town enough money to build a new school building, provide a wonderful new library, and establish a trust fund that would make the teachers in Red Bend the highest paid in western Kansas.

Over the next five years, new mysteries just kept falling into the laps of Doc and Johnny and those exploits will be told in upcoming editions of *Doc and Johnny's Old West Mysteries*.

THE END