

The Mystery of the Baffling Stagecoach Robberies

**Book Six in the
Doc and Johnny Old West Mystery Series**

By David Drake



Cover by Anonymous English Painter

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Books should be read in order since the story continues

Book ONE: *Johnny's Secret*

Book TWO: *The Red Bend Bank Robbery*

Book THREE: *The Pony Express Rides Again*

Book FOUR: *Kidnapped!*

Book FIVE: *The Crimson Bandit*

Book SIX: *The Baffling Stagecoach Robberies*

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. Medicine was not the science it is today and many illnesses still had no cures – many didn't even have short term treatments. The idea there were such things as 'germs' had only recently moved from a way-out theory to fact and therefore doctors had just begun thinking in terms of keeping things clean and sterile when they worked with patients.

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

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

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

Our Story to Date

Johnny, thirteen, an orphan, and living with his Great Aunt, Bea, in Red Bend, Kansas in 1880 had been shot in the chest and recovered, rounded up several bad guys and made good friends of Doc, the country Doctor, Cal, the Marshal, Cilla (short for Pricilla) the newspaper editor and a young lady named Clair (she had a wonderful smile and very soft hands). The Marshal had brought Johnny's horse, Diablo, from Kansas City where the boy had lived before his parents died. Johnny counts on Doc for advice when it comes to solving the mysteries that seem to always be popping up around him. And, oh yes, Johnny had become a multimillionaire in the previous several months (but we will just keep that between us because he doesn't want anybody to know about it).

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

In the third book Johnny decided to research the fate of a young Pony Express Rider who disappeared twenty years before on a ride from the Nebraska

border to Red Bend. He cared for a badly wounded boy who was a few years older than he, and who was also an orphan. They became close friends and worked together to solve the mystery. Together they fought through a blizzard, discovered a secluded cave, and Johnny put himself in terrible danger as he attempted to get one of the bad guys to incriminate himself.

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

In book five, with Jerry away for the summer, Johnny and Doc took on the Crimson Bandit – an odd sort of thief who Johnny came to admire well before he actually met him. Hmm? This book has lots of good conversation between Johnny and the grown-ups in his life. The case presents a major moral dilemma for him – right and wrong is sometimes not black and white.

CHAPTER ONE

Unlike the stagecoach rides that Johnny had experienced – getting shot and robbed – Jerry’s ride from Wichita back to Red Bend at the end of his summer away had been uneventful. During the final leg of the journey from McPherson, he was the only passenger.

There had been a time in his life when that would have been just fine with him – having time alone and not being required to converse with others – but during that summer he had not only become used to being with folks (he had lived as part of a large family), he discovered that he missed them when he was alone. It was, therefore, a somewhat different Jericho that his friends at Red Bend were going to meet when he would finally jump down onto Main Street from the big, red, coach.

Johnny was there to meet him. Smile met smile through the open window as the coach rolled in and jerked to a stop in front of the stage office.

“Jerry!”

“Johnny!”

“You look good!”

“So do you!”

With all those unnecessary – though expected – things said and out of the way, Jerry climbed to the top of the coach and tossed his two bags down to Johnny.

Doc and Cilla arrived, wanting to be there when their young friend returned. Johnny turned to them.

“He leaves with one bag and returns with two. I’m thinking he has his new girlfriend in the bigger one.”

Jerry launched himself off the coach onto Johnny’s shoulders and they were soon engaged in a long overdue and giggle filled tussle and roll there in the middle of the street.

The Marshal arrived and looked back and forth between the boys on the ground and Doc and Cilla on the sidewalk.

“Looks like about ten weeks of missing each other, I’d say.”

“If that’s just ten, I’d hate to see what ensues after a year apart,” Doc added.

“Wish I had that much energy this early in the morning,” Cilla said with a sigh.

The Marshal turned his attention back to the boys.

“You going to go at each other until blood is drawn or would you like to join us old folks for breakfast?”

They separated, rolled apart and lay there on their backs, puffing and giggling and smiling.

Johnny turned his head toward Jerry and spoke.

“We can always finish this later, but breakfast usually doesn’t wait.”

They struggled to their feet brushing the dust from their clothes.

“I need to wash up first. I’m filthy from the trip,” Jerry said.

The others all turned and looked at him in silence. Doc spoke.

“Who are you, young man, and what have you done to our beloved Jericho?”

Jerry seemed puzzled.

Johnny explained to him in a confidential tone.

“The washing thing – *you*, asking to wash up. Seems paradoxical (inconsistent) to the Jerry who left here a few weeks ago.”

Jerry broke a broad smile.

“One of several changes you may encounter. We’ll take my bags home and meet you old folks at the restaurant in a few minutes.”

“There’s number two,” Doc said.

“Again, Jerry seemed puzzled.”

“A take charge attitude we’re not used to,” he explained.

“Really?” Jerry said. “I hadn’t noticed. Imagine that. Me. Take charge!”

The boys moved off up the street to the livery, each with a bag in tow. Harry was waiting in the open double doors to greet him.

Jerry dropped his bag and trotted the final ten yards, administering a huge and lingering hug.

“Number three,” Johnny called out when he caught up.

Jerry just smiled, that time understanding number three referred to his newly acquired hugging thing.

“I have so much to tell you, Harry. Next to my first two months here in Red Bend, this summer has been the best time of my life. Promised the old gang I’d have breakfast with them, then I’ll come back, put on some fresh coffee, and we’ll spend the day together.”

There was a disturbance in a stall toward the rear of the stable. Jerry turned to look.

“Pinto! I figured you’d still be out at Aunt Bea’s place.”

He ran to him. It was a grand reunion.

“I’ll be back and we’ll go for a ride right after breakfast, right after I get cleaned up, right after Harry and I have time to catch up, right after Johnny and I . . . Seems like my calendar has already filled up for the day.”

Johnny had a simple suggestion.

“Wash, eat, Harry, Pinto. You and I have a lifetime in which to catch up.”

While Jerry washed up at the pump out back, Johnny lugged his bags up the stairs to his room. Jerry soon joined him.

“I have clean clothes in the small case. Can you believe that? I have three complete changes of clothes. I feel like a prince or something.”

On the way to the front of the stable, there was one more hug for Harry and an unnecessary promise to return shortly. Johnny and Harry exchanged a wink and a smile.

Out on the street Johnny had an observation.

“So, you seem to be a hugger, now.”

“My family in Wichita oozed hugs if you know what I mean. They hugged coming. They hugged going. They hugged in between. As you can imagine it was terribly uncomfortable for me at first. I can’t remember ever being hugged

by my father and of course not by my mom – I never knew her.”

“So – and this is just information seeking – will I need to be prepared to be on the receiving end of hugs from now on?”

“Unless you prefer to be surprised every time.”

“Just checking, you understand.”

“Boys and girls hug each other in the city – even just casual friends. I suppose I still need to be careful about that out here, right?”

“Unless you want some girl’s father to sick a shotgun barrel down your throat, I’d say refraining from that would be in your best interests. You will have to tell me all about how it is to hug a girl, though.”

“I can do that.”

Half way back down the street the agent from the stage office ran across the street ahead of them and into the Marshal’s office. By the time the boys were at the door to the restaurant a deputy and the agent hurried down the sidewalk and entered ahead of them. The boys followed. The agent walked directly to the Marshal and spoke to him in low tones.

“The strong box is empty as a possum-sucked egg – the one that come on the stage just now. All locked up tighter than a drum – just like it left Kansas City, but I’ll tell you it’s empty inside.”

The Marshal stood and excused himself.

“Let’s go have a look-see.”

Johnny looked from Doc to Cilla who were at the table. Doc spoke.

“Go on. See what’s up. We can all hear about each other’s summers later.”

The boys both nodded and hurried after the Marshal.

They followed him into the stage office. The empty, metal lock box was on a counter in the back room, somewhat humorously, Johnny thought, being looked after by two armed guards.

The agent demonstrated how the two key locks had been locked – each taking a different key – and the two chains that bound it across its widest dimension had been padlocked according to the usual procedure. The strong, iron hinges that allowed the lid to be opened were in perfect condition.

The Marshal looked inside.

“I thought there was always a second box – one that sits inside the main box and actually holds the goods.”

“There is – well, there should be, but as you can see it’s not there.”

“Where was it opened last?” the Marshal asked.

“At McPherson.”

“Talk to me about procedure – the who, the how, the records.”

The agent began.

“There is this paper manifest.”

He picked it up and handed it to the Marshal. The boys moved in close and also looked it over.

“You see it lists every stop where some item is to be removed from the box. The driver carries it. Each stop has its goods in a canvas pouch tagged with its destination. If there is no delivery at a stop, the box is not opened. The

pouches are always removed inside the stage office with the agent and armed guards overseeing the operation. On short layover where there are no drop offs the box stays on the coach – a guard moves outside to watch over it.

“The manifest gets signed by the agent at every stop verifying the box is in proper shape. When pouches are removed they are signed for.”

“In the old days the lock box rode up top behind the driver,” the Marshal began. “I understand that recently all that has changed with your Prairie Coach Line.”

“Right. Since last January all our coaches have a special compartment under the floor boards inside the coach. It’s also locked with a key. That makes it exceedingly difficult for a highwayman to get to it. The drivers don’t carry the key.”

“It would seem to be a foolproof system,” the Marshal said.

“It has been. As far as I know there’s not been a single lock box robbery this year. Our line has the best record in the industry. Stage lines had to do something to compete with the higher level of security provided by the trains.”

“Let’s go take a look at that compartment in the coach,” the Marshal said.

They were all soon outside. The agent rolled back the rug, unlocked the lid, and raised it.

“Just big enough to hold the box. Nothing else is ever carried in there.”

The Marshal felt all around inside the compartment – the ‘well’ as the agent called it. Johnny was immediately underneath the coach. Jerry, not really understanding why, slid under beside him.

“What we looking for?”

“The solution to the robbery?”

Jerry understood it meant that Johnny didn’t know, but he figured he’d recognize it when he came across it.

“Solid. Metal. Thick. Hmmm?”

“Sure looks secure to me,” Jerry said.

“Me too. Isn’t this great?”

“Great that it seems impossible to break into the lock box or the compartment and yet somebody did just that? How is that great?”

“A wonderful challenge, my friend. If there were an obvious answer it wouldn’t be a mystery, now would it?”

Jerry smiled. It was so good to be back with his ‘one of a kind’ best friend. He had missed Johnny’s odd ways and rare instincts about such things – well, about most everything, actually! There would be one small change in their relationship – Jerry now carried his own bar of soap! And, of course, there was that thing about Jerry suddenly knowing much more about girls than Johnny. That would become the focus of many a late night conversation.

Jerry pointed and spoke.

“Any idea what that little pipe is for?”

“Not yet. Let’s take a look. Hmm? A half inch pipe running from the rear wheel to the rear of the coach and then straight up the back.”

He shoulder-scooted on his back so he could examine the spot where it met the wheel.

“Grease plugging the open end. My guess is we will find some sort of grease reservoir up on the back of coach. It looks like some sort of automatic wheel greaser. Never heard of such a thing. There is also a small sprocket (gear) wheel on the inside of this coach wheel. Looks like every time the wheel makes one full rotation it moves the sprocket one click. There is a thin cable attached to the sprocket wheel. It runs along the back side of the pipe. See where they both attach to the rear of the well that carries the lockbox before they take a ninety degree turn toward the back?”

Jerry nodded.

“There’s almost the same set up on the other rear wheel.”

“Almost?” Johnny said turning to get a look.

“Just the pipe over here – no cable.”

“Let’s see where the pipe and cable go at the rear,” Johnny said.

They rolled out from under the coach and moved behind it. They opened the luggage compartment at the rear. It was covered by a large leather ‘tarp’ and they found it was basically empty holding only three small packages.

Up there!” Johnny said pointing. “That small wooden box attached to the back of the coach. The pipe and the cable enter it from beneath. My first guess is that as the cable is turned, just a tiny bit every time the sprocket clicks forward, the cable turns a counter or some such thing inside the box. After some specified number of turns the cable activates some mechanism that releases one dose of grease that gets pushed into the pipe and forces some out onto the place where the wheel and axil meet. Pretty ingenious, really.”

“Can’t see how that’s related to the robberies, can you?” Jerry said.

“Nope. But in a mystery one can never discount anything. Let’s ask the agent about the gadget.”

By the time the boys were back inside, the Marshal had returned to his office. They approached the agent.

“Mike. Got a question about the stage - that wheel greasing mechanism. Something new, is it?”

“Brand new. Saves time at the stops so passengers get to their destinations faster. Used to take fifteen minutes to loosen the wheels, grease them, and get ‘em back in place. Saves a half hour a day.”

“Very clever, I’d say,” Johnny said.

“It is that. Invented by a pair of middle aged brothers. They recently moved to a place just east of town – the old Thompson Trading Post. I hear that Jake’s a silversmith by trade and Bart’s a furniture maker. Not seen any of their work yet. Sometimes they get packages. I understand they have made lots of inventions between the two of them.”

“Just get packages?” Johnny asked. “That suggests they sell their wares around here instead of shipping them, I suppose.”

“I suppose. Like I said, I ain’t seen it. Furniture would probably have to go by freight wagon, but I’d think Jake’s stuff could be shipped by coach alright.”

“How often do they get shipments?”

“Oh, let’s see. Nearly every week I’d say. Heavy pouches, usually. Silver and hardware – screws, nails – I suspect.”

“Were they supposed to get a package on this stage?”

“Let’s look at the manifest and see. . . . No. Nothing listed for them.”

Mike looked at Jerry and indicated Johnny with a hitch of his head.

“Johnny writing another one of his stories is he?”

Jerry thought quickly.

“You know Johnny. There’s always a story brewing up there inside his head.”

Mike chuckled and shook his head.

“I need to get this telegram off to the main office and let them know about the robbery. I imagine they’ll add a couple of guards to the runs for a while.”

“But there was no hold up,” Jerry said. “I was on the coach. How will guards help?”

“How can they hurt? The company needs to show it’s doing something or they’ll begin losing business to the trains.”

Johnny nodded and spoke.

“If you’ll get that wire written we can drop it off at the telegraph office for you.”

“That would be very helpful. Thanks. Tell Gus I’ll stop by later this morning and pay for it.”

The boys trotted to the telegraph office, made small talk with Gus for a few minutes, and then entered the restaurant. The Marshal entered almost immediately after them having seen them cross the sidewalk in front of his office. Cilla and Doc were finishing breakfast. They all took seats and the Marshal directed his first question to Jerry.

“Looking back on the ride from McPherson, does anything stand out as being odd or out of place? Anything that might be related to the robbery?”

“Not really. I had slept during the previous leg of the trip – at night. There were two older ladies – sisters – that were on their way to McPherson from Kansas City. Not the highwayman type, you could say. Anyway, I was the only passenger from McPherson to Red Bend. We stopped twice to change horses at smaller stations. I got out and helped each time. The terrain is generally flat so they kept to four horse teams the whole way. The driver told me that from Red Bend on west they would go to six because of the hills just beyond Sunday Creek. That’s more than you wanted to know, I’m sure, but Johnny always says the more information the better.”

“Tell me about the stops – the ones where the horses were changed?”

“The usual, I imagine. The stage stopped out front of the stage office so the passengers could get off – *de-board*, the driver called it. The old team was unhitched. The fresh team hitched up and we were off again in under fifteen minutes.

We did get a new stagecoach at McPherson – something about the old one needing to go in for repairs. The lockbox had been removed from the one I’d been on and taken inside the station. When the new stagecoach was brought up alongside the one I’d been riding in, the guards and the station agent transferred the lockbox to the new one.

“A guard was out front waiting as we first pulled up and he remained with

the coaches until we pulled out. We got a new shotgun guy at McPherson, but the same driver continued into Red Bed. They alternate like that so one of the two of them is always relatively fresh and alert – so said the shotgun rider.”

The Marshal nodded and spoke again.

“Anybody inside either of the coaches while they were just standing there out front of the office?”

“Like I said, the guards and the station agent. You can bet if somebody was there who wasn’t authorized those guards would have sent him packing.”

“To your knowledge was the lock box checked at any of the in-between stops?”

“Not that I saw. Removing one is a pretty big deal. Inside the coach there is a piece of carpet spread between the front and rear seats covering the floor boards and the door or lid to the well where the lockbox rides. It has to be removed, the lid has to be unlocked and opened and the box pulled out.”

The Marshal turned to Johnny.

“You got a take on it?”

“Just one, for the time being.”

“And that would be . . . ?”

“It’s clearly got the makings of a new story: The Mystery of the Baffling Stagecoach Robberies.”

CHAPTER TWO

The boys returned to the livery where they made their horses ready for a ride – Jerry’s schedule seemed to have changed. They talked as they rode – partly about Jerry’s summer and partly about the new mystery. From time to time Johnny jotted down a note on a sheet of paper he kept secured under his belt.

It was a beautiful day – still hot in late August, but the dependable fall breeze had set in from the north making the moving air cool and refreshing. Once in the shade the temperature dropped fifteen degrees or more. Giving their horses their heads, they spent lots of time walking in the shade – proving again the natural wisdom of animals in general and horses in particular.

Johnny’s list grew as they rode. Like all of his lists that early in a case it was a combination of seemingly unrelated bits and pieces.

Lock box is really two boxes one nested inside of the other – why – for how long had it been done that way?

Guards let nobody close to the stage and the well in which the lock box sits.

Lock box was opened in McPherson and placed back on the new stage in perfect shape.

New automatic grease mechanism – find out more about the inventors – what they actually make and where they sell things. (Maybe a gift for Aunt Bea)

What about the guards – they seem to be the only people ever alone with the lockbox.

How do the keys work? Where are they kept?

What sort of things were in the box that was stolen (that disappeared – at least)

Was this robbery really the first one that was done in this way like Mike had reported?

There would certainly be more things to add as they came to mind. The boys rode on.

Johnny showed his friend the waterfall that had played a prominent part in the Mystery of the Crimson Bandit. At some other time they would come back and look over the cave – maybe go for a swim in the pool under the falling water. Johnny had wanted to do that since the day he had first seen it. Swimming in swirling water should be great fun.

“Let’s circle on back east to the old Trading Post,” Johnny suggested. “I’ve always wanted to meet a real life inventor.”

It was a half hour ride making a big arc north of town, along the red hills that set the northern border of Aunt Bea’s little ranch, through two creeks and then straight across the prairie to the large old wood-frame building.

It sat some hundred yards north of the main road. The lane that connected the road with the large, old building was mostly overgrown. The trading post had not been in business for more than a dozen years. As Red Bend grew, it no longer served a purpose for the local ranchers and farmers or for the travelers that passed that way. Johnny was surprised the building was in such good shape considering its long period of disuse.

They tied up at the hitching rail out front. Two things happened simultaneously (at the same time) – a rifle hole opened to the left of the door and that door opened revealing a short, rotund (fat) little man with chubby red cheeks and no more hair than a new born baby.

Johnny spoke.

“Jake or Bart, I assume. I’m Johnny and this is Jerry. No need for that rifle over there. We come in peace.”

The boys smiled at the little joke. The man didn’t.

“What do you want? His tone was gruff, unpleasant, and impatient. “This is private property.”

“Yes we know. In these parts folks are usually happy to have visitors. We certainly wouldn’t have come if we’d have known you would be upset.”

“Like I asked, ‘what do you want?’ ”

“Like I said, ‘came for a visit’. We understand you are new to these parts. Just wanted to welcome you.”

The rifle port closed and a second man appeared behind the first – taller, thinner, with a full head of long gray hair, still carrying the gun.

“I’m Bart. You’ve met my skittish (nervous) older brother Jake.”

Bart urged Jake out onto the hard packed, bare ground in front of the building and closed the door behind them. Johnny had several observations, which he kept to himself, of course.

They were clearly upset about the boys’ arrival. That usually meant folks had something to hide. Closing the door reinforced that idea. They felt the need to act to protect themselves first and talk second. Maybe it had to do with a valuable supply of silver or finished merchandise. Maybe something else.

Johnny tried again.

“Mike, the stage agent, tells us you make furniture and things from silver. Was wondering if you might have something appropriate for me to buy as a gift for my aunt – she’s an older lady with pretty simple tastes.”

“Not set up to sell from here,” the shorter one said.

“Just been here a short time,” the taller one added as if to explain. In general he seemed far more pleasant than his brother. “Give us a month or so to get settled in and to put together some stock.”

Mike also says you are inventors. I dabble in making gadgets myself,” Johnny went on. “Always wanted to pick the brain of a genuine inventor.

Bart offered a smile.

“We’ve done a few things. I suppose you’re referring to the automatic wheel greaser for the stage coaches. I suppose Mike told you about it.”

“Yes. That’s what I was referring to. We had a chance to look over the one on the stage that arrived this morning. If I have it figured out right it is brilliant in its simplicity.”

“You use words I wouldn’t expect from a kid your age,” Bart said. “When I was a kid I got into trouble with the other boys all the time for doing the same thing.”

“I’m what Cilla at the newspaper calls a budding writer. I’ve had a couple of stories printed in newspapers around the state. Like you, I guess, I do love

words.”

Although Bart seemed somewhat interested in the conversation, Jake clearly did not. He was becoming more and more impatient and stressed. The boys sensed it was time to leave.

“We are really sorry that we intruded. I assure you that we didn’t intend to be any bother.”

The taller one nodded as if to say he accepted the explanation and apology. Without any doubt, he was the nicer of the two. The boys mounted up and left down the old lane toward the road to the south. They would ride it west into town completing a large circle around Red Bend.

“Strange!” Jerry said once they were out of ear shot of the men.

“Stranger than strange if you ask me,” Johnny added.

“Why do you say that?”

“Men who make their living selling the wares they create were not at all interested in selling us anything. Greeting us with a rifle. Did you notice the remodeling they had done to the building?”

“I did. New windows. New shingles. A new front door. Who knows what else on the inside?”

“All that wasn’t accomplished without some money. I have to wonder why they came out here and settled outside of town like that. It’s off the beaten track. Nobody will stop by to make purchases.”

“They don’t seem to be friendly folks – especially the short one,” Jerry said stating the obvious. “Perhaps they prefer to stay away from other people.”

“Too bad. I’d hoped to see what I could learn about their approach to coming up with new ideas. We’ll probably be too busy anyway with the new stagecoach mystery on our hands.”

“So,” Jerry began, “what are the basic questions about the robbery – how the inner box was removed, where it was removed, and who removed it?”

“Those are right on, I’d say. I want to run it all by Doc. He always has important perspectives to suggest.”

“You can do that while I spend time with Harry. Hope he doesn’t feel bad that he dropped to number three on my list.”

“Number three? I don’t understand.”

“You and the ‘old folks’, first, Pinto second, Harry third.”

“I’m sure he understands. He was a kid once, you know.”

Johnny tied up in front of the newspaper office while Jerry rode on up the street to the livery. It was going on noon. Johnny made his way upstairs to Doc’s office.

“Have a good morning with Jericho?” Doc asked.

“It was great. Interesting though. It was like he’d never been gone. We just took up right where we had left off ten weeks ago. He’s sure appreciative of the summer experience you arranged for him. I think it did exactly what it was supposed to do. He’s more determined than ever to become a veterinarian – *and* a boyfriend.”

Johnny giggled. Doc raised his eyebrows.

“Smitten (in love), is he?”

“Sure seems that way. He’s still to spill the beans about it – her – them. I expect to get filled in about everything tonight. I’m staying over with him.”

“Where’s your head in reference to the robbery?” Doc asked clearly ready to move on. “I’m sure you’ve been working on it.”

“Nothing even remotely solid has popped up yet. It’s still one of those *who*, *where*, and *how*, things. I must say I’m impressed with the advances the stage company is making – improving security, reducing travel time, adding up to date equipment. Do you think they’ll be able to continue to compete with the railroad?”

“Not a chance,” Doc said. “The railroad is the future of travel and transportation in the world – until men learn how to fly, at least.”

They both chuckled at that – men flying – ridiculous! A very good joke! [The Wright brothers first flew 23 years later in 1903. Boeings first small scale commercial flights began after 1915 – Johnny would have been nearly 50 years old.]

“So, enlighten me, Doc. Set me in the right direction on this.”

“A tall order. How about something like this? Who will benefit the most if the stage lines can no longer be trusted to carry valuable goods?”

“Ah! You go right for the big picture. My head certainly hadn’t gone there, yet. I was stuck at the level of who would profit from the stolen goods. That takes it up several notches from just a plain old highwaymen with a new twist. What makes you look at it that way, Doc?”

“Think about all the safeguards that were bypassed – the double box, the safety of the new box-well in the stage floor, the ever present guards when the stage is stopped, and the meticulous (very careful) use of detailed manifests (lists of things carried).”

“I see. All of those things may have been involved and that required a great deal of information about the processes the line followed plus lots of careful planning. No dummy could have pulled this off. It also appears to mean that somebody was able to have private access to the box at some point or points. Not even sure what I mean by that. Way beyond the ability of a gang of run of the mill thieves. You thinking it’s an inside job – somebody within the Prairie Stagecoach Lines?”

“That seems reasonable, but don’t limit your thinking that way.”

“Don’t limit myself? I see. You men who else might have some kind of access to all those things? Very good, Doc. Not sure what I’d do without your expansive perspective.”

“*Expansive perspective?* That’s a combination of words the world has surely never heard before.”

Johnny grinned and continued.

“Well, it’s true. You have a way of expanding your thinking beyond boundaries that most people can’t breach (pierce). It is one of your many outstanding talents.”

Doc shrugged. It was as much of an acknowledgement as he ever gave a compliment.

“It seems unlikely anybody who depends on the stage company for their

livelihood (source of income) would be trying to sabotage it.” Johnny continued thinking out loud.

“Maybe,” Doc said.

It had been one of his statements designed to make Johnny put on the brakes – to rethink something he had said.

“I see. A better question might be, is there anybody within the employ of the company who may have loyalties to somebody else – like a spy or infiltrator.”

Doc nodded and spoke.

“Must be past lunch time. Think Jerry will join us?”

“Doubt it. He wants to spend time with Harry. They’ve become like family, you know. Probably heating a can of beans over a candle as we speak.”

They shared a smile.

Doc nodded. They left for the restaurant. On the sidewalk downstairs they were joined by Cilla. When they arrived inside, the Marshal was sitting alone at Doc’s table.

“What’s been keeping you people?”

It hadn’t been a genuine question – more like his way of saying hello – so it was ignored. Johnny had lots of questions – mostly for Doc and Cilla although the first was directed at the Marshal.

“What can you tell me about Mike, the stage agent?”

“Well let’s see,” the Marshal began. “About five feet eight, early fifties, married, three children . . .”

The tease was worth a smile, but no more from Johnny, whose head was on a more thoughtful mission.

“Let’s get serious. The future of the stage company may be on the line, here.”

Cilla gave it a try.

“Mike’s been with the stage line for lots of years. Started out as a wrangler, caring for the horses and worked his way up. Been the agent here for five years or so. He’s no genius, but got more above his shoulders than the average wrangler, for sure. Lots of common sense.”

“Ever been in trouble in with the law?”

Johnny looked at the Marshal.

“Not around here. An upstanding citizen, I’d say.”

“Any financial problems – sickness in his family or things like that?”

They three older folks looked at each other and shook their heads indicating they knew about nothing like that.

“Sounds like you’re after Mike for some reason,” the Marshal said.

“Same line of questions could be for the purpose of exonerating (clearing) him. What about anybody else who works for the line?”

“The wrangler is new – a young man, can’t call his name, drifted this way from St. Louis, I believe.”

“What about the guards?”

“They rotate from station to station – a month in one place and then a month in another,” the Marshal said. “Can’t say I really know much about either of the ones that are here now.”

"I suppose the same is true of the drivers."

"No drivers live here, if that's what you mean. A couple of times a week one will stay overnight – there are sleeping rooms on the second floor of the stage office. Mike would be the best source of information about all those folks. You thinking it may be an inside job?"

"Just considering all possible angles, Marshal. A change of topic, now. Anybody know anything about Bart and Jake – the brothers who have remodeled the old Trading Post out east of town?"

"I understand one is a furniture maker and one a silver smith," Cilla said. "I've been thinking about seeing if they'd let me do an article about them – as the new merchants in the area."

"Take your rifle if you travel out to their place. Jerry and I stopped by and found they were not very friendly folks."

"Really?" the Marshal said sounding concerned.

"No need to get upset. We worked things out – they sort of said *leave* so we sort of left. They've done a lot of work on the old building – roof, windows, doors. Looks like they're here for the long haul. I'm thinking a new paint job is in the near future."

"How could you know that?"

"My highly developed detective sense," Johnny said spreading a smile. "And, I saw three, gallon cans of paint beside the front door and two new paint brushes lying on top of them. Gray, if you can believe that. Who'd paint an old weathered gray board building, gray?"

"They've been there a couple of months," the Marshal said, trying to get back to Johnny's question.

He had a large stake in solving the robbery himself and was happy to receive any help that was offered. Johnny continued on about the two newcomers.

"They invented a wheel greasing mechanism the coaches are using. It's really quite a nice advancement – a real time saver Mike says. I'm baffled why they would settle out here. Apparently no family in the area. Only minimal demand for what they make – furniture and silver work. Bart suggested they had other inventions as well. If that's true, I'd think they'd be well off financially and could live anywhere they wanted to."

"Maybe they just wanted to live here?" Doc said, trying to rein in Johnny's imagination.

"Alright. You got me there. I could afford to live anywhere I wanted to, also, but I choose here. Another topic – Doc's suggestion. Who would benefit from the stage line failing?"

"The railroad," Cilla said without hesitation. "They ran the Pony Express out of business – well mostly. I'm sure they have their sights set on the stage lines as well."

"That seems like an impossible area for us to investigate – there are dozens of railroad companies and none of them centered any place close to here."

"But," Cilla said, "one of them that I know of is planning to lay track from

Sandy Ford, on up west of Red Bend and on to Great Bend, eventually connecting with the east/west lines that have already been established up in Nebraska.”

“Interesting,” Johnny said. “Got a name, a home office, a local contact?”

“In my office. The Sandy Ford paper had a series of articles a month or so ago. Wentworth is the person’s name that runs through my head, but we can check that out. Nobody local that I know of. I do know there are men buying up right of ways for the tracks from ranchers and farmers both south and west of town.”

“I’ll come over later and you can point me toward the articles.”

Johnny turned to the Marshal.

“I assume you are investigating the robbery. Anything you’ve found you can share?”

“Just that this is not the first robbery that was pulled using the same basic, disappearing, locked box, technique. Two weeks ago the east bound stage was robbed somewhere between here and McPherson. It was reported over there and the Marshal has been looking into it. I’ve telegraphed him for whatever information he can share with me.”

“Fascinating. Essentially the same stretch of the route, then – between Red Bend and McPherson; one stage going east and then one coming west. So, on the first one, the lockbox would have been checked here by Mike and the guards before going on east, correct?”

“That’s the way Mike explains it.”

“I wonder how often the stage makes deliveries out of that lock box to here in Red Bend.”

“Have to ask Mike. I know the bank gets deliveries on the first Monday of every month.”

“Now that Red Bend has become a stage hub, with coaches through here every day and going off in all directions, this station plays a big part in security operations, I’d think,” Johnny said, more or less just thinking out loud. “I wonder why Mike didn’t know about the first robbery.”

The others shrugged waiting to see where Johnny’s head was taking him. There was a long period of silence.

“What?” Johnny said at last looking from face to face. “We’re still in the asking phase, not the solving stage. Do I have to do everything, here?”

“Not quite everything,” the Marshal said. “I’ll pick up the tab for your lunch today.”

Again, it was worth no more than smiles and an appreciative nod from Johnny.

CHAPTER THREE

After lunch Johnny returned to the stage office.

"Hey, Mike. Got a couple of minutes?"

"Always for you, Johnny. Caught my thief yet?"

He chuckled and Johnny went along, offering a smile.

"Probably not 'til sunset."

Mike seemed to enjoy the comeback.

"I was wondering when the stage company started using the double lock box arrangement."

"About three months now."

"Is it used on all the runs?"

"All those that carry lockboxes."

"They ever remain here over night or for a prolonged period of time?"

"Not usually. Seldom in here more than a few minutes. Have to keep those coaches on schedule. In and out as fast as we can. We have the team change down to under ten minutes at my station."

"Impressive!"

Mike beamed. He clearly needed reassurance that he was doing a good job and thrived on praise. Johnny went on.

"How long has that greasing gadget been in use?"

"About the same – two or three months – a little longer, maybe."

"Any maintenance problems with it?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Just add a scoop of grease to the canister on the back and off they go again."

"Where was that system installed on the coaches?"

"For new coaches at the home office in Kansas City. For the old coaches most of the upgrades have been done right here in Red Bend. The inventors do the installation themselves. They're smart fellows, but not very trusting, you know what I mean?"

"I've met them. I *do* understand what you mean. How many coaches does the company operate?"

"Operate or own?"

"Not sure what the difference would be," Johnny said searching for information.

"The Prairie Line has 101 stations. 15 of them keep an extra coach on hand for emergencies like breakdowns or accidents – we keep a spare here. Never more than a day away from a replacement that way. We operate forty routes with a coach on every one, of course."

"So, about 55 coaches, then," Johnny said.

Mike did some figuring, drawing the addition problem out in the air with his finger ($15 + 40 = \underline{\quad}$). After a few moments he confirmed that Johnny's calculation had been accurate.

"Right. Fifty five."

"You keep spare parts locally, I suppose."

“Rear wheel, front wheel, tongue and axils. Lots of tack, of course (reins, harnesses and such).”

“Tell me about the rear wheels – the ones that get greased automatically.”

“Well, let’s see. Four feet high. Only use fourteen spoke wheels – softens the jolts from the road better than ten and twelve – makes for a smoother ride. Wheels have a iron rim – half inch thick, two inches wide – welded seam and screwed to the wooden wheel. Metal sleeve that the axil fits into. I guess that’s about all. Well, they have to be very strong. The way a coach is made, two thirds of the weight rests on the rear wheels and axil.”

“How reliable is that sprocket arrangement for the greaser?”

“All metal. No problems I know about. It’s really a pretty simple gadget. Wish I’d a thought it up. Them Coffelt brothers – Bart and Jake – is makin’ out like robbers, if you ask me.”

“How’s that?”

“They won’t sell the greasers. They rents them to the company for two dollars a month each.”

“I would say they are making a good deal of money, then,” Johnny said doing some quick calculations in his head.

Fifty five coaches times two dollars each is one hundred and ten dollars a month times twelve months came to over \$1,300 a year (nearly \$40,000) in today’s money). Although it was a great deal of money, it was not a huge amount.

“Do they do regular maintenance on the gadget?”

“Just when a problem arises. Like I said, it’s a really simple set up. Once in a while they come and make an adjustment of some kind.”

“How often were the wheels greased before the addition of the automatic gadget?”

“About every two station stops so that’s somewhere between every forty and sixty five miles.”

“I assume the coaches had to be remodeled a bit when the wells for the new lockbox arrangement were installed.”

“You’re right. That was all done back in Kansas City – the greaser was installed on most of the coaches at the same time. For a while we had all the coaches in service so a few at a time could be – like you called it – remodeled.”

“That done by company employees?”

“I don’t know. I guess I assumed it was, but I really don’t know. Billy’ll know. He’s the driver about to come in. He drove the coaches back and forth from KC when they was gettin’ updated.”

“Do you know who manufacturer’s the lock boxes?”

“No idea. Main office takes care of things like that.”

“One last question from the *Pest of Red Bend*,” Johnny said, referring to himself and offering a smile. “Can you take me though the process from the time the stage arrives until it leaves? Assume there is something to take out of the lock box as well as something to put into it.”

“Sure. Well now, let’s see. As soon as we know the coach is getting close – during the day we can see the trail dust from the upstairs windows and at night

the lantern beside the driver's seat lights up – the wrangler begins getting the fresh team into the harnesses – that's all out back at the stable. The coach pulls up front and the passengers get out if this is their destination or if they just want to rest their legs or relieve themselves. Then the lockbox is removed from the coach and brought inside by a guard – two if it's extra heavy. Sometimes the drivers go upstairs and grab a really quick bite to eat and refill their canteens. We provide a large canteen for the passengers – no other line does that. If a driver change is to take place the new driver gets ready. Katie from the restaurant usually has somebody here with sandwiches the passengers can buy if they want food.

“While all that's going on, a stable hand has been unhitching the team from the coach and leads them back to the stable. We used to take the coach back there to make the change, but this new way saves five minutes or more. The new team is brought around and hitched up.

“While all that's going on, the agent opens the lockbox with the three keys. That's always done inside the office, here.”

“Three keys?” Johnny asked.

“One for each of the two locks that are built into the outer box, and one that unlocks the padlocks on the two chains that are wound around the outside of the box.”

“So, you have the three keys here?”

“I have six keys here. There is a code on a tag on the lockbox that indicates which keys to use. Many possible combinations, you see.”

Johnny understood and he would calculate the actual number later on.

“Then, the inner box is removed and opened.”

“Is that inner box not locked?”

“No. I guess they figure with all the safeguards to protect the outer box, it wasn't needed on the inner one. Moving on, the manifest lays on top inside and it tells the agent which canvas pouch is to be removed at each stop. The agent would remove the one for his station and then add the pouch from his station and enter that on the manifest. Pouches are put right in the station's safe once they're out of the lockbox. The box is closed and the outer box relocked. Just before the passengers board, the guard places the box in the well of the coach and locks the lid there in the floor. That key is never carried by the guard. There are three possible locks, each with its own key. We keep the keys in the stations and just try them 'til one works. Another security measure. Nothing there to say which key. He replaces the carpet, the passengers board the coach, and away they go again. All takes no more than fifteen minutes – like I said, ten here at my station. When the lock box doesn't need to be tended to, I've seen coaches in and out in under ten minutes.”

“It all seems very efficient. I must say that even though I've ridden hundreds of miles in stagecoaches, I really never knew how much work went into a stop. You make it all seem so simple.”

Mike beamed. Johnny prepared to leave.

“Thanks for your time and all the great information. Is that the two o'clock stage that the Billy fellow will be driving?”

“Right. Day routes are often even on time.”

He chuckled thinking his little joke had been quite funny. Johnny acknowledged it with a quick smile and nod.

He left and headed to the newspaper office.

“I assume there was no article in the McPherson paper about the first lock box robbery or you’d have known about it,” he said, even before he had shut the door behind him.”

“I may not have received that edition, yet. They aren’t real good about getting copies out to us other papers. I’m thinking it may arrive on the two o’clock stage today.”

Johnny took several sheets of paper to the big chair by the corner window and began making sketches of various things he had come across up to that point – things that might be related in some way to the robberies. He drew out the lockboxes. He drew a diagram of the greasing mechanism – more because it intrigued him and less because he thought it had anything to do with the robberies. He drew top and side views of the well in the floor of the coach. It reminded him there was a small flat box at the rear of that well – on the outside – through which the cable ran. It was the cable that worked the counter that set the frequency of the automatic squirts of grease. It made him begin thinking.

The circumference of the wheel (distance around the rim) was about $12 \frac{1}{2}$ feet (a 4 foot diameter times π , approximately 3). Considering there were 5,280 feet in a mile that meant the wheel turned completely around approximately 1,175 times in covering a mile. Mike had said a coach needed to be greased every forty to sixty miles. At forty miles that would $40 \times 1,175$ rotations = roughly 50,000 rotations of each rear wheel. That was a lot of counting for a mechanical counter. On the fifty thousandth click of the clicker the greaser was activated and in some way moved a shot of grease through the tube to the rear axils. Then, he supposed, the counter reset itself to all zeros, and started the counting all over.

Again, interesting, but not apparently connected with the robberies. It would be the construction of the well that he would need to investigate further.

A question came to mind. If that well could be opened from underneath, the lockbox could be removed without getting access to the inside of the coach. He didn’t know whether that could be done, but he still wondered; ‘If it *could* be done, where and when and how *would* it be done?’

It didn’t seem reasonable that it could take place when the coach was parked in front of the station – it was in full view of everybody passing by as well as the guard. The only other times the stage seemed to stop was to water the horses along the route between stations. Again, between the driver, the man riding shotgun, and the passengers, it was very unlikely anyone could crawl beneath the coach and remove the box.

He needed to examine a coach in more detail. Mike had an extra in the stable and a stage was due in at any time. Johnny folded his drawings and slipped them into his rear pocket. He addressed Cilla as he moved toward the door.

“Heading back to the stage station. I’ll pick up the papers if they’re on it.”

He wanted to make sure he got a look at stage that was about to arrive so

he waited out front on the sidewalk. He figured if he'd be in back with the other one when the stagecoach pulled in he would miss the chance to look it over. He could always examine the spare later.

"Mike. I assume it's alright if I look under the coach that's coming in, isn't it?"

He had phrased it so his request was hard deny – *'I assume it's alright . . .'*

The coach arrived. Things proceeded just like Mike said they did. Everybody had their job and everybody did it. Johnny figured he only had ten or so minutes. He rolled underneath and traced the pipe from the rear of the coach to both back wheels. He traced the cable – it came forward from the center of the back of the coach to the little box attached to the bottom of the well and then curved back to the left wheel – *left* as the driver would sit in his seat up top.

That extra little box bothered Johnny from several standpoints. First, it was far forward of the wheel – why not just curve the cable from the back of the coach directly over to the wheel? If it needed to go through that box for some reason, why could the box have not been located further toward the rear? Back there it would have set higher and been further off the road. Johnny thought that would have been a safer place for it considering all the small rocks and debris that the wheels and hoofs kicked up underneath. He couldn't figure the reason for that box. It was metal and was welded to the bottom of the well so it appeared it couldn't be opened from the outside. Before he could move to the inside of the coach the lock box was being brought outside. He watched while the box was lowered into the well, covered with the lid and locked in place.

It certainly seemed like a foolproof system – or better stated, a thief-proof system.

While underneath, he had noted that the metal well was made of iron plates welded together at all the seams. It was fastened to the floor by way of a four inch wide lip that overlapped the floor supports inside. There was no way the entire well could be removed from the outside – from beneath the coach.

The two passengers boarded and the driver flicked the whip over the heads of the strong lead horses to get them moving. (It was the sound of the whip cracking in the air that urged the horses on. A skilled driver almost never hit the horses with the whip.) It was on its way again in under fifteen minutes.

"Mike, can I take a look at the spare coach outback?"

"Have at it. The Marshal's already gone over it. Take Gerald with you. He can answer any questions you many have."

'Good for the Marshal' Johnny thought. 'I'll have to share information with him – although I certainly don't have any that seems like it will help in any way. I wonder what he found.'

As it turned out, Gerald was one of the guards.

"Can you unlock the lid in the floor so I can examine the well?"

"Marshal already done that."

"I'd like to, also."

Gerald opened the lid. It was plain that the lip of the well was solidly attached to the floor braces with twelve screws. Johnny felt all around inside.

The seams had all been welded on the outside. None were welded on the inside. He had no idea if that was how such a box was usually made. He had read that the weld was often stronger than the material it was holding together. He'd find someone to ask about that.

The hinges and lock mechanism were both heavy duty. He was certain the lid could not be pried open. All of that made it appear that the box had to be tampered with before or after it was placed into the well.

He took a look back underneath even though he figured he had already exhausted the possibilities down there. He was soon out and examining the rear of the coach. Most of the cargo the stage carried was stacked and tied on shelves across the back wall. The entire area was protected with a heavy leather covering that not only kept the cargo from moving around and getting lost, but kept it relatively dust free and dry in the rain and snow.

He was more interested with the greasing mechanism and the counter that was attached to the cable that was in turn attached to the sprocket on the rear, left wheel. It was covered by a wooden box that was easily slipped off. It worked much like Johnny had figured. He had not been able to figure out what provided the force that squirted the grease onto the axil. There was a metal cylinder some two feet long and three inches wide that contained the grease. The pipe he had traced across the bottom was attached to the bottom of that cylinder. At the top was a solid piece of iron shaped to fit snugly inside that cylinder. It looked to be a foot long and fairly heavy. As it slid down into the cylinder, its weight put pressure on the grease that was held below it. When the counter reached some predetermined count – Johnny had figured 50,000 – a slide mechanism opened and allowed grease to flow into the pipe, and at the other end, onto the axil. With the next click of the counter – 50,001 or maybe 00,001 after it reset itself – that slide closed again and stopped the flow. Ingenious!

It seemed clear that the greaser had no connection to the robberies, but Johnny loved gadgets and as gadgets went, that one stood at the top of his all-time great gadget list.

He thanked Gerald for his assistance and walked back up the street to where Diablo had been tethered way longer than usual. He led him to the livery for water and fixed him a stall next to Jerry's horse, Pinto, with oats and fresh straw. They always seemed happy to see each other. Johnny had to stop and wonder if horses really had feelings like that or if that was just him reading human feelings into them.

Jerry and Harry were in the office up front. Johnny really didn't want to interrupt them – they'd been away from each other for almost three months and had a lot of catching up to do. Since arrangements had been made for him to stay overnight at Jerry's place, Johnny needed to find some way to entertain himself for a few hours.

He walked to Clair's house. Her brothers were out front wrestling – they were *a/ways* wrestling.

“Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Johnny. Haven't seen much of you around here lately.”

“Lots of stuff going on, I guess,” Johnny said not wanting to get into

specifics.

“CLAIRABELLE!” the youngest called toward the house at the top of his lungs. “YOUR BOY FRIEND IS HERE!” (Younger brothers are always sooooo helpful!)

The oldest brother clapped his hand over the little boy’s mouth. Johnny blushed and kicked at the grass.

That next minute seemed to take an hour. Nobody had anything to say.

Clair came out onto the porch and Johnnie crossed the lawn to meet her as she moved down the steps.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey back,” he said unable to believe he had really uttered such an inane (stupid) thing. “Can you go for a walk?”

“Sure. That would be great. Let me tell mother.”

She reentered the house and was immediately back outside.

“I hear Jerry is back,” she said as they headed north along a narrow street that lead to the edge of town.

“Got in this morning. Seems to have had a great time down in Wichita. I really missed him so it’s good to have him back. I’m staying over at his place tonight so we can get caught up on things.”

“School starts in two weeks,” she said, clearly ignoring the train of thought he had been following. “There’s a dance to help kick things off. You going?”

Johnny understood it was her less than subtle way of saying she hoped he would be there and that they could spend the time together. Back then, young people their ages didn’t date alone as couples, so it was the group activities that they all looked forward to.

“I’ll probably go. Hadn’t heard about it. In two weeks you say?”

“Friday night before school starts on Monday. You be doing your study thing with Cilla and Doc again this year?”

“That’s the plan. Looks like Jerry will be a part of it, too.”

During the summer, Johnny had come to a conclusion about his relationship with Clair. He liked to be with her – she was pretty and she always smelled good and he really liked holding her soft hands and walking with his arm around her waist – when others weren’t close by. But, they really shared no interests other than those things. He knew her goal was to eventually turn seventeen, get married, and have a family. That just wasn’t anything like what he wanted from his life.

He was going to college. He wanted a girlfriend who had more intellectual interests. He hoped that didn’t make him a snob, but it was no fun for him to talk about who was doing what with whom. He liked to think and talk about big ideas, like how big the universe was, what the next breakthrough was going to be medicine, the wonderful books he had read and why the authors had written them in the styles they had. Clair not only had no interest in such things, but seemed to become uncomfortable when he brought up topics related to questions that had no real answer yet.

He wondered if he needed to be honest about such things with her. He knew that someday he’d have to be, but for the rest of the afternoon he decided

to just enjoy her perfume, her soft hands, and getting to put his arm around her waist. Since she clearly enjoyed those things, too, he figured he really wasn't just using her for his own pleasure.

CHAPTER FOUR

That night was to hold a whole lot more than just two young friends getting caught up on each other's lives – well, *more* if by that one includes being called out in the dark by bad guys, threatened at the end of a rifle, escaping a dangerous situation through a hail of bullets and having the Marshal dressing them down for their foolish behavior.

Johnny returned to the livery at five o'clock. Jerry was preparing fresh stalls for the next day. Harry was leaning on a pitchfork nearby, 'helping'. They were still talking.

"Hey, you two old ladies not caught up yet?" Johnny kidded through a grin.

"I guess we have been going at it, haven't we," Harry said. "He's got that head of his so filled with the latest doctorin' information you'll never believe it!"

Now THAT was the kind of enthusiasm for new ideas Johnny wanted to find in a *girlfriend* – suppose Harry would . . .!

Harry went back to his office. Johnny helped Jerry finish the stalls.

"I got paid this summer," Jerry said. "Did you know I was going to get paid? Two dollars a week. I feel rich. I decided what I wanted to do with part of it when I got back here. Take you to the restaurant for supper – biggest steak they have. You alright with that?"

"Spending somebody else's money? Sure I'm always alright with that."

It was the response he felt he had to give even though he really hated taking his friend's money in that way. Some quick calculations suggested Jerry had earned twenty dollars, which was really a very large amount of money for a boy his age (like \$600 today).

"Let's clean up and go have a feast then," Jerry said clearly elated at the idea of being able to treat his friend.

They washed up out back and Jerry climbed the ladder to his room to get the money. He returned with a shiny fifty cent piece, which he proudly showed to Johnny. Johnny immediately sensed a problem. Supper for two would come closer to a dollar. Jerry had no idea about money and prices of things. To him fifty cents would probably buy a horse. It could become an embarrassing situation.

They found a table inside the restaurant and ordered. Doc was just leaving.

"I need just a minute with Doc, Jerry. Be right back."

Johnny caught Doc before he left and had a whispered conversation with him.

"Jerry's treating me to supper. He only brought fifty cents. Can you fix it with the waitress so she doesn't let on? Give her this dollar. With his money it will cover everything."

Doc nodded and agreed. Johnny returned to the table.

"So, what about the girl you left behind in Wichita?" Johnny asked thinking the topic was well overdue.

"She is wonderful. She is a year older than I am, but much shorter. She has black hair and brown eyes and soft skin. She is quite intelligent and is going

to become a teacher. They have high school in Wichita and she is in her third year. High school lasts four years there. She already has more education than most of the teachers we have at our school here in Red Bend.

"She lives with her father and mother and little brother. Her parents have a clothes washing business – for the rich people, I guess. They wash and iron and deliver to lots of places six days a week. Margaret Beth helps them, of course. She is very easy to talk with and likes to hear me ramble on about my dreams and other things that are important to me."

"White Cloud?" Johnny asked as a short, to the point, question.

"Cherokee on her mother's side."

"Margaret Beth?"

"English on her father's side."

"Wichita is a long way away from here," Johnny said wondering where the idea might lead.

"I know – we know," Jerry said. "I talked it over with Harry and he says he can work it out so I can go see her over Christmas. The family I lived with down there asked if I could come back for Christmas so it looks like it will work out."

"Four months is a long time to be separated," Johnny said as if testing his friend's commitment.

"But we will have lots of letters in between. We have talked it all out."

"All?"

"We are each going to write a letter twice a month – it will be expensive, but Harry says there can be money for that. We will get to know each other even better that way. While I was down there we talked every single day after we met."

"You sound like one love sick puppy to me," Johnny said.

"And you'd be right." Jerry grinned. "I'm probably way too young for that, but it's not like we're going to go off and get married. She knows I have college ahead of me and that's no problem for her."

"I'm really happy for you. She sounds like a perfect match."

"She is, I think. Harry says sometimes things that seem wonderful and perfect at one point in a person's life don't continue to seem that way later on. He's afraid I'll get my heart broken, I think. Margaret Beth and I even talked about that. If it lasts forever that will be wonderful. If it doesn't, at least we will have helped each other grow into adults with lots of good experiences that should help make our lives great even if we aren't together."

"Your wisdom astounds me, Jerry. She certainly sounds like a magnificent friend."

"Like you are. She and I talked a lot about you. She really likes you, by the way."

"I guess the feeling is mutual. You say she *doesn't* have a sister."

They shared a grin.

"Afraid not – just a little brother who can be a real pain. She says he's that way because he is jealous of all the time I took her away from him. I learned a lot about being a part of a family down there. It's a lot harder than I thought it would be. Built-in responsibilities that you have to meet even though you never

asked for them. It's just part of the arrangement – taking good care of each other.”

As they ate, they talked on for a while about families and life and eventually got around to the stagecoach robberies. Johnny filled him in on everything he had learned.

“I want us to go back to the stage station stable and do one more thing with that spare coach,” Johnny said. “You up for some breaking and entering, tonight?”

“Of course. What is it that you couldn't do in the daylight?”

“That little box underneath, the one that's attached to the back side of the well, bothers me. Can't tell you why except it doesn't seem to have any purpose.”

“I can just imagine that something like that would give you nightmares,” Jerry said offering a smile. “Tonight?”

“Sooner the better.”

They traded quick smiles.

“Tonight it will be. It's great being back here with you – even if you aren't soft and pretty.”

Had they been outside it would have called for an all-out tussle. Inside, they just exchanged more grins.

“You want dessert?” Jerry asked clearly having no more idea about money than he had before he had left for Wichita.”

“Dessert will be free at Aunt Bea's and she made me promise to get you out there as soon as I could. She is very fond of you, you know.”

“Yes, I know. And I'm fond of her. We're like all part of one big family here.”

“Let's get out of here and see what she has waiting for us.”

“But you said she knew you were staying in town tonight.”

“She has a sixth sense about things. I just imagine she'll have one of her 'just in case' things whopped up and waiting.”

“I'll just leave the money on the table,” Jerry said laying the fifty cent piece beside his plate. “The waitress can have anything that's left over. That's how it's done, right? I've watched Doc.”

Johnny nodded. At some point there would need to be a discussion about money things, but *that* certainly didn't seem like the right time.

They stood and left. The two were soon riding east down Main Street on their way out of town. With the sun at their backs they cast long, humorous looking, tall, narrow, shadows on the road ahead of them.

Johnny had been right. Hard crust apple cobbler, not long out of the oven, awaited them. Jerry administered an uncharacteristic hug to Aunt Bea who gladly accepted it with an exaggerated wink toward Johnny over his friend's shoulder. Johnny shrugged and waited.

The cobbler was, of course, delicious. The conversation went on until after dark. Johnny's aunt had a wonderful way of extending such talks and making the other person feel very special in the process. Johnny just sat back watching and beaming through much of the evening.

Before they left for town, she wrapped up what was left of the goodies and sent it along with them. It might or might not last to the town limits.

Johnny directed them into the alley that ran behind the stage office. There was no stage due in that night so he figured the stable should be free of workers. Most of the help stayed on the second floor of the main building. There was light in the upstairs windows and moving shadows that confirmed his hunch.

They stopped and hitched their horses to a tree in the deep shadows across the alley to the north. Johnny explained what he wanted them to do.

"I'll show you where the odd little box is. The cable runs through it so I'm guessing something is going on inside it. We will jack up the left rear wheel just enough so it can be turned – just like when the stage is moving. As the wheel turns the cable turns. While one of us turns the wheel the other will put his ear to that box and see what he can hear."

"How will we know what we are hearing?" Jerry asked.

"I have no idea. Isn't that great?"

It wasn't the first time Jerry had come up against such a claim from his friend, so he met it with a grin and a sigh and was all in on the project.

The moon, though bright outside, helped only a little inside the stable. While Johnny found the supplies they would need, Jerry made the horses comfortable with their presence. The supplies turned out to be an empty barrel and a fifteen foot long, 4 X 4 inch, beam of wood. They placed the beam under the rear axle on the left side of the coach and ran it across the barrel, making it a first class fulcrum and lever. They tried it out, putting their weight on top of the furthest end of the beam. The stage lifted with relative ease.

"Now we just need to find something to hold the stage up off the ground once it's lifted," Johnny said.

Jerry found a keg that looked to be a perfect height. They positioned it so it could be moved into place easily once the stage had been raised.

It was cause for laughter. With both of them at the end of the beam the coach again raised, but then there was nobody left to move the keg.

"Time for Plan B," Johnny said through his grin.

He pointed at a bale of hay and they soon had it balanced near the end of the beam. With its added weight, Jerry had no difficulty raising the coach by himself. Johnny quickly slid the keg into place and they were ready to go to work with the wheel six inches off the floor.

"Since I really don't know what you're listening for, I'll turn the wheel," Jerry said.

Johnny nodded.

"First, I want to get an idea of how the counter sounds in the greaser unit on the back of the coach. Once I hear that, I'll listen to the little box.

With that accomplished, Johnny slid under the coach, finding a position from which he could raise himself just enough to press his ear against the little box. Jerry continued turning the wheel – top going forward to simulate how it would move when being pulled forward by a team. Johnny listened for a long time.

"You fall asleep under there," Jerry joked at last.

“Too much fascinating stuff going on in this little box. I think I have what we need unless you want to take a listen as well.”

“I’ll pass.”

At that moment they heard the noise of approaching horses in the alley. Johnny rolled out and remained crouched low beside the stagecoach, listening. Jerry knelt down on one knee next to him.

“Whoever it is, they stopped just outside the back doors,” Jerry said.

“Let’s get out of here,” Johnny said nudging Jerry to their right toward the side door.

With that door open they found themselves silhouetted against the moonlit world outside.

“Not good,” they said as one.

And, that happened to really be true. Two figures had already entered the double, alley doors that had been left open for ventilation.

“Whose there?” one of the men asked.

“Just a couple of ghosts looking for a comfortable cemetery,” Johnny said.

Under other circumstances it would have been quite funny.

The shorter of the two men raised his rifle clearly prepared to shoot. Jerry pushed Johnny to the left outside and he dove to the right. The rifle fired – not once but repeatedly. The boys scampered off across the alley into the shadows and dropped to their bellies behind a stack of straw bales.

The men entered the stable and the boys headed for their horses. They led them west down the alley to the cross street before mounting and heading toward Main.

It was after ten o’clock.

“Let’s head to your place,” Johnny suggested.

They were soon at the livery stable and had their horses bedded down for the night. They returned to the doors that opened onto Main Street and looked east toward the stage station. Somebody was running toward the Marshal’s office.

“Think we should go down?” Jerry asked.

“Definitely not,” Johnny said. “In the morning we can listen for what’s known about it and then determine what we want to admit to – or not.”

“Who do you think shot at us – employees? Jerry asked.”

“Not in a million years. Somebody carrying rifles at the ready – that indicates bad intentions, I’d say.”

“Maybe they’d come to steal the horses, you think?”

“That’s one possibility. I imagine there are others. Like I said, I figure we’ll learn things in the morning.”

They finished the apple cobbler and turned in for the night. Jerry was still tired from his long stagecoach ride. Johnny figured early morning would bring important information and sleep would make early morning come a whole lot faster than sitting up thinking about it.

* * *

Six a.m. found Johnny awake and Jerry still sleeping. Johnny decided not to disturb him. He slipped into his shirt and boots and was soon out on Main

Street heading for the Restaurant. There was still the hint of cool in the air. That would soon be chased away by the blistering hot rising sun. The area needed rain, but then in August, the area always needed rain.

The farmer's crops were mostly in and ready for market. The rancher's beef was mostly fattened and ready for the cattle drives to the railheads. Johnny figured the new railroad going through the area would be a real boon (benefit) to both farmers and ranchers by shortening the distance their things would need to be taken for shipment. He felt bad it would be so devastating (damaging) to the stagecoach line.

He had forgotten to get the names of the people involved in getting the right of way for the railroad. Cilla said she thought she had them at her office. He would take care of that after breakfast.

First, however, he stuck his head into the Marshal's office. Only a deputy was there.

"Morning, deputy. The town make it through another night, did it?"

Again, he was fishing for information that he couldn't ask about directly without revealing his own involvement.

"Barely. Some sort of something over at the stage office – shooting, tampering with the reserve stage, all sorts of things. Very strange I can tell you that."

"Marshal know about it yet?"

"Oh, yes."

"Any idea who was involved?"

"All I know is what the Marshal said when he got back here from lookin' into it."

"And that was . . .?"

"I can quote him directly – 'Confound those kids!' "

"I see. Kids? Really?"

"That's what he said.

Johnny stepped back outside needing to do a bit of planning – at least Plan C and maybe D and E as well. There were several ways he could go with it – Not show up for meals that day hoping it would blow over without him being interrogated (questioned); Concoct some boldfaced lie to buy time; Admit to the activity when asked; Or, bring it out in the open first thing without being asked. He decided that last approach would probably be in their best interests in the long run.

He entered the restaurant. Doc was there alone. Johnny took a seat.

"Seen the Marshal yet this morning?" he asked the old gentleman.

"Not yet. Need him do you?"

Suddenly, it was Doc who was fishing for information.

"Just wondering. Cilla?"

"Not seen her yet either. Can't tell if you looking to find them or to avoid them."

"Why on earth would I ever want to avoid two of my three esteemed mentors (respected teachers)?"

Doc ignored the question and went on.

“Where’s my coffee drinking buddy, young Jericho?”

“Still asleep. We talked late last night. Why do you always refer to him as *young* Jericho? You never call me *young* Johnny.”

“I will have to give it some thought. It’s never come to mind. Not sure why. I can say I don’t refer to you as young because you were obviously born an old man. I just imagine that the moment you slid into the world you were offering the doctor suggestions about how to improve his technique and quoting some medical book to him by page and paragraph.”

Johnny loved it when Doc went off spouting absurdities like that – especially when it put ‘*old* Johnny’ in such a good light.

Cilla entered.

“Hear about the fracas (dangerous commotion) at the stage office last night?” she asked as she took a seat.

“Fracas?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. Shots fired. Men fleeing on horseback. Somebody tampering with the stage they keep in reserve there in the stable.”

“Anything broken or stolen?” Johnny asked.

“Not that I heard. Just a very strange set of events the way I got the story from the deputy.”

The Marshal entered and walked toward Doc’s table more deliberately (forcefully) than usual.

He stood for a moment, hands on hips, looking down at Johnny.

“There were shenanigans at the stage office last night and those shenanigans have Jonathon Baker shenanigans written all over them.”

‘So much for just coming right out and admitting to it first,’ Johnny – that is *Jonathon Baker* – thought to himself.

“Shenanigans, huh? I wasn’t even away one could write on a shenanigan.”

He was trying to buy a little think time.

“Let’s see – shenanigans: mischief, trickery, monkey-shines, tomfoolery, pranks – so many shades of meaning. You’ll just have to be more specific, Marshal.”

“Let’s take propping up a stagecoach on a keg of molasses for starters.”

“Come now, Marshal. Its rear wheel couldn’t be spun around if it was still on the ground, now, could it?”

“Spun?”

“Yes, spun so the cable on the automatic greasing mechanism would turn.”

“Cable?”

“The one that activates the counter that squirts the axil with lubrication at exactly the correct moment – after about 50 miles I estimate.”

“You were trying to grease a wheel?”

“Me. Who said me?”

“/ said you. Give!”

Johnny laid out the activity from start to finish making the case that everything about the coach needed to be investigated in order to rule things in or

out as possible aids in the robberies.

The Marshal calmed down.

Cilla took notes for an article.

Johnny felt he had escaped yet another sticky situation.

Doc chuckled. He hadn't had so much fun in a long time!

CHAPTER FIVE

Johnny accompanied Cilla to her office and looked quickly through the McPherson newspaper. He found the stage coach robbery story on page four – it was a page one story, but the front of the paper had probably already been set at the time they learned about the robbery.

“The story doesn’t really have much new information in it. According to all the witnesses, no ‘outsider’ got close to the stage at any time on its run from Red Bend to McPherson.”

Johnny was sure Mike was trustworthy so even if there was some way he could have removed the inner box – which Johnny believed was impossible while it was in the station office – he would never have done that. The robbery had to have happened at the station at McPherson or some place along the 40 mile stretch of road between the two towns.

The driver said they stopped twice to water the horses. Nobody left the coach and no one other than the driver and the man riding shotgun – a guard – came anywhere close to the stagecoach. The mystery was growing.

A man rode by the big front window at breakneck speed and jumped to the ground at the Marshal’s office. Johnny and Cilla went out onto the sidewalk. Johnny trotted on across the street to see what was up.

“Sheriff. They burned my barn down.”

“They? Whose they?”

“Them railroad guys – the ones who want me to sell them a strip of land right down the center of my farm.”

“Why do you say *they* did it?”

“I told them I wouldn’t sell. They said I’d better re-think it or something bad might happen around my place. Well, I’d say something bad happened and they was the cause.”

“I’ll ride back to your place with you and take a look around, Raymond,” the Marshal said.

They mounted up. The Marshal looked down at Johnny.

“If you’re coming – and I’m sure you are – I’d rather you’d ride with us than follow along way behind.”

“Let me get Diablo. I’ll catch up before you hit the creek.”

Johnny ran to the livery. Jerry had been watching the proceedings from the front doors and had the horses almost ready by the time his friend arrived.

They were already at a full gallop when they appeared at the front doors and turned west on Main. Riding side by side, Johnny reached inside his shirt and pulled out a biscuit, handing it across to Jerry.

“Figured you’d be hungry.”

“Thanks, mom!”

“We will handle THAT remark later. There’s the Marshal just ahead.”

It was a half hour’s ride. The remains of the barn was still smoldering as they pulled up and dismounted. On the way, Raymond had expanded on the story. He found the fire at sun up and he and his family tried to fight it with buckets of water until it was clearly out of hand.

Johnny walked toward the barn. Jerry accompanied him.

“What are we looking for?” he asked.

“Can’t be sure. Maybe something will indicate where it started.”

They circled the remains of the building. Johnny stopped at the south west corner and pointed.

“What do you see?”

“Ash. A pile of dark gray ash from burned wood,” Jerry answered.

“And what do you see over there, fifteen feet away?”

“Burned pieces of wood fallen into where the building stood.”

“Me too. See the difference?”

“Not at all, I’m afraid.”

“Here, there is a large pile of ash with few remaining pieces of burned boards. Everywhere else there are the burned boards. So, I’m figuring, this is the spot somebody doused the barn with coal oil (kerosene) or some other flammable liquid. It would tend to burn much hotter and break down the wood completely into ash, whereas the wood that burned without being soaked like that would burn at a lower temperature and leave the burned boards behind.”

“Very clever. From the pile of ash would you say a lot of flammable liquid had been used?”

“Good catch. It sure looks like that to me. Somebody wanted to make sure the place would go up in a hurry. This whole corner must have been soaked some six feet high and ten feet wide in both directions around the sides. Better get the Marshal and Diablo back here.”

Jerry went to bring Cal and the horses around back. Johnny continued to poke around in the debris (rubble). By the time they arrived, Jerry had explained Johnny’s theory to the Marshal and Raymond.

The Marshal nodded and gave Johnny a nod that said, ‘well done, son’.

“Sniff the ash,” Johnny said lifting a handful high for the others to smell.

“Coal oil for sure,” Raymond said.

“You keep any here on the place?” the Marshal asked.

“In the well house. Use it in a heater to keep the water tank in the horse trough from freezing in the winter.”

The boys ran to the well house.

“One can?” Johnny called back – a question.

“Yes. One?” Raymond answered.

“Still here, then,” Johnny said. “Seems to be full. Guess somebody brought their own”

They returned to where the men were still standing. Johnny scooped up another handful of ash and put it close to Diablo’s nose.

“Need to find something that smells like this, boy. Go take a look.”

He draped the reins loosely around the saddle horn and urged Diablo to move out on his own. He followed close behind. The horse moved back and forth around the yard clearly understanding that he was to give the area a thorough sniffing. Finding nothing, he then moved out into the high grass that encircled the area. He stopped, whinnied, and raised his head up and down several times.

Johnny hurried to where he stood and parted the grass below him with his feet.

“Better come and see this, Marshal. Looks like Diab’s as good as a bloodhound.”

There were two, five gallon cans.

“Notice the cans are brand new,” Johnny said. “They are manufactured by the North American Gas and light Company. The one in Raymond’s well house is from the Darwin Company.” (The only two companies that manufactured Kerosene in 1880)

“Where did you purchase your can?” the Marshal asked, turning to Raymond.

“General store in Red Bend. It’s the only brand they sell – the green can with the brown letters. I didn’t even know there was any other kind.”

“Looks to be at least one other kind and it comes in bright red cans with white letters,” Jerry said picking up one of the cans Diablo had found.

“Jerry and I have seen enough, Marshal,” Johnny said. “I guess we’ll head back to town.”

The Marshal turned to Raymond. “That’s Johnny-talk for ‘I’ve got something up my sleeve and I don’t want the Marshal interfering just yet.’”

“Tell a deputy I want him to come and remain through the night out here,” the Marshal said. “I’ll stay here ‘til he arrives.”

Johnny nodded. The boys mounted up.

“Be careful,” the Marshal said, knowing full well those two words had never made one whit of difference before, so wondered to himself why he bothered uttering them at all.

The boys rode off at a full gallop. *That* made the Marshal even more concerned! It was scary enough when the boy *walked* himself into an investigation. For him to gallop full out into one was downright disturbing.

They stopped first at the Marshal’s office to deliver the message. One of the deputies left immediately. Cilla came out onto the sidewalk. They led their horses across the street and tied them up in front of her office. Doc looked out his open window upstairs.

“Be up in a minute, Doc,” Johnny called.

“So, what did you learn?” Cilla asked.

“It was arson. Somebody set the barn on fire, but that’s not for general knowledge yet. We need to know what brand of kerosene the railroads use – specifically the one wanting to expand in our direction. They use it in the heaters to warm the passenger cars during cold weather, right?”

“Right,” Cilla answered. “I can get that information for you. Let me send a telegram to a friend who’s involved with the railroads.”

“We’ll be up at Docs for a few minutes.”

The boys raced up the stairs. Doc met them in the doorway to his bed room.

“Come in and sit. Fill me in.”

Uncharacteristically, Jerry began. Johnny and Doc shared a private wink. When he finished Johnny filled in a few details and then went on.

“So, Cilla is finding out what brand of kerosene the railroad uses – because it could be they are out to force Raymond to sell. I still have them as a suspect in the stagecoach robberies as well – just don’t have any evidence that points to them yet.”

“So, you are saying this all may be part of one mystery or it may be two separate mysteries – robberies and the right of way grab,” Doc said going for clarification.”

“Right, or both even maybe,” Jerry said.

“I think I even understood that, Jericho,” Doc said with a smile. “You have any idea by whom you were confronted at the stable last night?”

“Not really. We could barely see their silhouettes in the doorway – the two of them blended together in one irregularly configured globule (shape).”

Jerry giggled.

“You two are something else: Doc says ‘by whom you were confronted’ and Johnny says, ‘blended together in one irregularly configured globule’. I declare, it’s really hard work to disentangle your erudite verbiage. (Make sense of your educated language.)

Like so many other things among them, it was good for an extended chuckle and shared smiles.

The boys stood to leave. Doc had a final word for them.

“Better notify Pastor so he can organize a barn raising for Raymond. He’ll need a new one before the winter snows arrive.”

“I guess I don’t know about such a thing – a barn raising?” Johnny said/asked.

“It’s a prairie tradition. When a farmer or rancher needs a new barn or house due to some tragedy, the people in the area all gather and put up a new one for them. Usually completed in a day. The men bring supplies and do the work. The women bring food and drink and after it’s finished there’s usually a square dance on the new floor.”

“Sounds great,” Jerry said; “both the helpful spirit of prairie people and the fun. I learned how to dance this summer. Now all I need to learn is how to ‘barn’ – I mean, *build* a barn, you understand.”

The boys left, first trotting the length of Main Street to the community church to deliver the news to the Pastor. Then, they doubled back to the telegraph office to make sure Cilla had sent the wire to her friend about the railroad’s use of kerosene.

“Cilla send a wire yet this morning, Gus?”

“Sure did. This may be the response coming in now. It’s my transmitter’s code. Hold on a second.”

“He translated the series of clicks and clacks on his receiver into words on a page and handed it to Johnny.”

“We’ll deliver it. Actually it was really for us anyway. Thanks Gus.”

Again they were off across the street on the trot. They entered the newspaper office.

“I suppose this is mostly just to tell you that your friend got right after the question you sent him. The railroads all use the big red cans from the Gas and

Light Company. They distribute it in the five gallon cans. The Darwin Company only sells in smaller, gallon cans out this way. I guess it points us toward the barn burners.”

“A very likely possibility, at least,” Cilla said, cautioning the boys. “I’m sure other people buy it besides the railroads.”

Johnny spoke as if thinking out loud.

“Let’s see? Railroad guy threatens Raymond with trouble. Raymond’s barn is burned down – that qualifies as trouble. The large, five gallon, red kerosene cans are found near the fire that reeked of kerosene. The only known sources of kerosene in five gallon red cans in this area are the railroads. I’d say we have more than just some wild hunch going here.”

“And I have to agree. Just be careful.”

Johnny pretended to look at her over the top of his nonexistent glasses the way she often tried to make a point by looking at him over the top of her own.

“I know,” Cilla said with a sigh. “Two words that brilliant brain of yours refuses to understand. It makes me feel better knowing I said them. We’ll leave it at that.”

The boys went out onto the wooden sidewalk and took seats with their backs to the wall. They were hardly settled in when the Marshal appeared at the west end of Main Street. They got up and went into the center of the street to wait for him.

“That kerosene in the large red cans is used by all the railroads, Marshal,” Johnny announced long before he had dismounted and tied up in front of his office. “Probably not enough to arrest anybody though, huh?”

“Probably not but I’ll look into it.”

He tied up and the boys followed him into this office. The Marshal had new information.

“I got the names of the two men who have been after Raymond to sell – Wentworth and McCormack. It was Wentworth who made the threat. I’ve put out word that I want to talk with him. I’m going to telegraph his railroad – The Atherton Railroad – and have them get the two of them to me pronto.”

“Good work, Marshal,” Johnny said, clearly sincere in the remark. “Talk with him, sniff him for kerosene, arrest him. We should have this one all locked up by the end of the week.”

“The only thing in what you just said that seems reasonable is that it appears you are letting me handle it – that’s good.”

Johnny got serious.

“I’m thinking that just in case the railroad guys might also be behind the stagecoach robberies, guards need to be placed around the stage office and stable every night. Fires would certainly cause financial problems for the stage line. Raymond was just lucky he didn’t have any animals in the barn when it caught fire. It would be a disaster if the stage stable went up in flames with spare teams inside.”

“That’s actually a pretty good idea. I’ll spring a deputy and suggest that Mike keep one of his guards outside at night well.”

“Probably another good idea would be for Mike to make that suggestion to

the head office, don't you think," Johnny offered. "Red Bend is just one of over a hundred stage offices."

"I'll take care of that."

"Good. We'll feel safer that way next time we go to take a midnight look at that stagecoach," Johnny said.

"I suggest you do your looking during the day with Mike's specific permission next time. You two have any new insights into how those robberies may have been done? I'm baffled, I'll tell you that."

"Jerry shrugged and looked at Johnny."

"It's all but solved. They always happen on the run between here and McPherson or McPherson and here. Now that we know that, all we have to do is determine how it's done."

"Oh. That's all - determine *how* it's done?"

"Glad we agree on that, Marshal. We'll check in later. I think the two of us will head out to Aunt Bea's for lunch. Want to join us?"

"I'm so far behind on paper work I may not have time to eat 'til Saturday."

"Oh, that reminds me," Johnny said as an afterthought. "The Parson is organizing a barn raising for Raymond on Saturday. It'll be our first. Exciting!"

"Good old Parson. Leave it to him."

"Actually, it was Doc's idea, but I'm sure Parson would have come up with it if he'd known about it first."

The Marshal just nodded, not really wanting to get into who did what first and who would have done it first if they had had more information earlier. The boys understood and left him to his paper work.

They returned to Cilla's.

"Got a question, Cilla," Johnny began. "If I know a manufacturer's name how can I find things out about the company – like where it's located, who owns it, things like that?"

"There's a book in my library. Thompson's Directory of Manufacturers and Merchandise Distributors' West of the Mississippi River."

"Must take both front and back covers just to print the name on the book," Jerry said trying to make a joke.

The others nodded and smiled. Johnny had a question.

"What if it's located *east* of the river?"

"There's another volume that covers that area – much thicker than this one. I don't have it. If we need it we can telegraph the research librarian at the St. Louis Public Library. She's looked things up for me before."

The boys moved to the book shelves across the south wall on the east side of the room. Jerry found the book – two inches thick and dusty.

"What are we looking up?" he asked.

"That metal well in the stagecoach floor had a name struck into it on the underside – B&JC Company. Nothing else."

Jerry began turning pages.

"Nothing I see in here."

He took the book to Cilla at her desk. She looked and agreed.

"If it's a company that was established this year it won't be in that edition

of the book. Let me put a wire together for the St. Louis Library asking for a search of the newest one for the west as well as the east.”

That done, the boys delivered it to Gus and waited until it was on its way in a string of dots and dashes along the copper wire that connected one end of the continent with the other. They were both amazed that such a rapid means of communication was really available. They certainly felt fortunate to be living in such a technologically advanced era.

They left for Aunt Bea’s place with visions of ham and yams, green beans and apple pie.

CHAPTER SIX

The boys settled for mashed potatoes and hot roast beef sandwiches smothered in thick brown gravy, with creamed corn and peach cobbler – a trade off from their fantasies that they were happy to make.

They told Aunt Bea about the fire and barn raising. She said that someone from the church had already contacted her and she agreed to organize the women and see that food was supplied. She asked the boys to ride the rural area and notify the outlying ranchers and farmers about the event. They agreed, of course.

“If we split up the area it shouldn’t take us more than two hours to get to everybody,” Johnny said.

“I know the area east of town pretty well,” Jerry said. “I can take that and the south.”

“Great. I’ll go north and west. Meet you at the livery stable when we’re finished.”

They were soon on their way, each one working on a fist full of hard crust cobbler as they rode off in opposite directions.

Jerry had one additional thing on his mind. He and Johnny had wondered what the Coffelt brothers – tall Bart and short Jake – had going on in the building out back of the trading post. It seemed like a good time to have a look.

He approached from the north. He doubted if they would be able to see him approaching since the smaller building stood between him and the Trading post. He dismounted at the rear and left Pinto behind to graze. He approached the building. It was frame like the trading post and had also been extensively remodeled with new windows, roof, and doors.

He looked in through one of the two, very large windows – one on each side of the wide double doors that sat in the center of the rear wall. The inside was well lit. He could see there were two windows on each of the four walls. It was just one large open space with a half dozen large, sturdy, wooden work tables and workbenches arranged as an oval – east to west.

On one of them sat a half dozen of the smaller metal boxes made to fit inside the lock boxes used by the stage company. It raised immediate questions.

‘Why would they have those boxes here?’ he wondered to himself.

He tried some possible answers.

‘Left over from the stage robberies, perhaps. Something to do with the greasing mechanism.’

Neither seemed like a reasonable answer.

He continued searching the area with his eyes. There was welding equipment and large pieces of thick iron – the kind from which the lock boxes were made. Reasonably, he figured, there were lengths of pipe of the size used in the greasing gadgets. A coil of cable hung on the wall. It was like the cable they had seen on the underside of the coaches. There were tool boxes filled with saws, files, drills, chisels, hammers and such.

On a desk against the wall to his right were several stacks of forms – invoices, perhaps. He wanted to get a closer look at them so he tried one of the

back doors. To his surprise, it was not locked. He opened it just enough for his slender form to slip inside. He went directly to the desk and picked up one of the sheets of paper. It was titled, *'Furniture and Silver Products by the Coffelt Brothers'*. A second read, *'Coffelt Mechanical'*. He figured that had to do with the greaser and maybe some of their other inventions. The third all but jumped off the desk top into his hands – *B&JC Company*.

It came to him in a flash – *Bart & Jake Coffelt Company*. He arranged a sample of each of the forms into a neat stack, folded them, and slipped them into his rear pocket.

As he turned to leave he heard voices just outside the front door on the south side.

'Can't be good,' he said to himself.

He decided there would likely not be time to cross the room to the open back door so he sought a hiding place behind a set of tall shelves in the northwest corner of the room. He crouched low and opened his mouth wide. His father had taught him that breathing through your open mouth made less noise than breathing through your nose – a piece of Indian wisdom he figured.

The two men were haggling back and forth about something. Jerry couldn't make out just what it was. Jake noticed the open back door and accused Bart of having left it open. Bart denied it and said it was just like something Jake would have done. They went on about it for some time while Jake crossed the room and closed the door. He slipped a short iron rod into the lock to secure it.

'One more, *not good*,' Jerry thought to himself. 'How can I get out of here, now?'

He examined the nearby window with his eyes. They were not made to open. He swallowed hard.

The men had left the front door open – for ventilation, Jerry assumed. They had moved to the work benches across the room to the east and had their backs to him. Remaining bent low, he inched his way toward the south wall. It was a wide plank, wooden floor, and from his experience with such surfaces he knew they tended to squeak. He moved gingerly (gently), slowly releasing his weight onto the floor with each new step. It seemed to work – no squeaks.

As he reached the front door he put his weight down for the final step needed before he would be outside. That's when the worst possible of all possible worst possibilities happened – a world class squeak arose from the floor. He moved swiftly outside and, remaining crouched, made his way under the windows along the south and west sides of the building toward the rear. He had no idea how, if at all, the men inside had reacted to the noise, but he proceeded as if they were coming for him with rifles blazing. He jump mounted Pinto from the rear and urged him south east toward the road at a full gallop. He figured it would be a really great time to meet up with somebody – a regiment of cavalry, for example – riding the road in case the Coffelts decided to come after him.

He met nobody, but on the plus side, looking back, he could see the men were not in pursuit. His heart was beating rapidly. Gradually his breathing

returned to normal and he set off for the next farmhouse to the east.

He smiled. Doc had told him the best way to learn the true meaning of words and phrases was to experience them in the real world. He figured he had just learned *well* the meaning of 'too close for comfort!'

* * *

It was a little after two o'clock when Johnny returned to the livery stable. He left Diablo out back at the watering trough and went inside to see if Harry needed anything while he waited for Jerry. They chatted as Johnny cleaned the stalls that Diablo and Pinto had been using.

At two thirty, Jerry rode in, wearing the smile of all smiles. He dismounted and patted Pinto on his flank urging him back through the building to the watering trough.

"From the boy's smile I'd say he either found five dollars or met a very pretty girl," Harry said to Johnny as if Jerry were not within earshot.

"I don't know, Harry, with a grin like that I'm thinking *both* of those things," Johnny came back with a grin of his own.

He turned to Jerry.

"Give, friend. What's up?"

Jerry removed the sheets of paper from his pocket and handed them, still folded, to Johnny. Johnny opened them and gave each a once over as he shuffled slowly through the sheets.

"I'd say these are worth a king sized smile," he said.

He turned to Harry who he knew would not understand.

"Stuff related to the stage robbery, maybe. And, I'd suggest you lecture the kid on not taking unnecessary, foolhardy, downright dangerous risks."

Just as Johnny was about to administer a lecture of his own, Jerry spoke in all seriousness.

"Oh, my foolhardy risks were absolutely necessary, as you can see."

Johnny gave up pursuing it. Harry returned to his office.

"So, give!" Johnny said as they moved toward the front of the building. "Details. I need details."

Jerry described his escapade in great detail while they walked toward the newspaper office. Once there, Johnny gave Cilla the short version of Jerry's experience.

"So, I guess we really don't need the help of your librarian friend in St. Louis. I can send him – or her – a telegram to that effect if you want me to."

"Already received a reply. It only varies in one detail from what Jerry seems to have learned."

"What's that?" the boys asked as one.

"The last name *she* found was not Coffelt, but Coleman. Same initial. Have to wonder which name is real."

"Yes. I'll say. A mystery within a mystery within a mystery," Johnny said.

Jerry turned to Cilla and spoke.

"Let's not even ask him to untangle the meaning of that sentence for us."

She agreed with a nod and they shared a chuckle and sets of raised eyebrows.

"We need to get a look at the deed to the trading post. That should have the real name on it, right?" Johnny asked.

"Not necessarily," Cilla said. "No real way to prove who you are, you know. If you have the cash on hand to buy a place you can bet the seller's not going to question what name you use."

"I suppose you're right. I need to send a telegram, then."

Jerry followed as Johnny left. As he closed the door behind them, he turned and offered a shrug to Cilla indicating he had no idea whatsoever what was whirling through his friend's brain.

Once outside, they crossed the street. Johnny explained.

"We're going to telegraph the Chief Marshal's office in Kansas City and see if they have anything on the Coleman brothers."

"You think under that name they may be wanted?" Jerry asked clearly confused.

"Never know. Bart and Jake had some reason for not wanting to be known as Colemans here in Red Bend."

"Or, by the stage company, I'd say," Jerry added.

"Very good point. I'll make a detective out of you yet – that is if you don't get your fool head blown off doing stupid things like you did this afternoon."

"That would be great for Halloween – I could ride through town like the *Headless Horseman from Sleepy Hollow*."

"A great story by Washington Irving – but it is JUST a story you know. I've seen a few chickens walk around after their heads have been cut off but never a human being."

They arrived at Gus's office and the telegram was sent – one of those Johnny often sent under the signature, *Cal Calvin, Marshal by JB*. They usually produced quick responses.

"Got a telegram for the Marshal," Gus said once he had finished sending the new one from Johnny. "You see that he gets it, will you?"

"You know I will."

Outside, Johnny read it, of course. It was a response from the railroad about the agents who were in the area buying up right of ways for the new track. It confirmed the names Wentworth and McCormack and indicated they had been contacted and told to get in touch with the Marshal immediately.

They delivered the telegram to Cal and filled him in on what they had learned about Bart and Jake. Johnny went on.

"I already wired the Marshal's office in KC to see if they are wanted by the law – one of our *Marshal Calvin by JB* telegrams – just to save you time understand."

"So it's OUR JB telegrams now, is it."

"Of course. We're a great team. Just think back on all the cases we've solved together – well, that I've let you help me solve, at least."

The Marshal turned to Jerry.

"Watch yourself with this kid, Jerry, or he'll have you signing over your first born child to him – and he'll likely charge you for its room and board."

They boys both loved that kind of byplay. It made them feel included and

accepted by the adults in their lives. They hoped they would remember to be playful like that with kids when they became grownups.

Outside they met two strangers tying up out front. Johnny approached them, hand out. Jerry thought to himself that someday his friend was going to do that and get his hand bitten off.

“Mr. Wentworth and Mr. McCormack, I assume. I’m Johnny. This Jerry. We help out the Marshal. He’s waiting for you.”

The men looked at each other wearing puzzled expressions and moved by the boys on inside.

“How could you have possibly known who they were?” Jerry asked.

“They are wearing suits and vests and expensive dress boots. I figured that made them either business men or high stakes gamblers. Since there’s no high stakes gambling in Red Bend that left business men. Business men usually travel alone. There were two of them. Besides, the taller one had an envelope showing in his coat pocket. The return address was, the Atherton Railroad – the one Raymond mentioned.”

“I suppose all that *would* point to who they are,” Jerry said, actually impressed. He had seen the envelope, but had not thought to read what was printed on it.

“I’d like to hear what’s going on in there, but I suppose it’s better letting it be an adult to adult conversation. Lots of grownups seem to think boys our age can’t be competent, smart, and savvy about really important things. I hope I never get to be that way.”

Jerry nodded, thinking there was nothing else to say on the matter. If any kid’s life had proved what Johnny had just said, it had been Jerry’s – at least prior to arriving in Red Bend.

While the confab (discussion) was taking place in the Marshal’s office, the boys went back to wait for the telegram to come in from Kansas City.

At three thirty Gus’s gadget began clicking out his telegrapher’s code: --. ..-- - .- . -.. -... . - . -.. (Gus at Red Bend). He soon had the message decoded: *Jake and Bart Colman aka Coffelt suspects in three cases deceptive practices (dishonest dealings). Charges never proved. Witnesses disappeared. Possibly dangerous.*

Johnny turned to Jerry.

“See that! Dangerous! You could have been killed.”

“May I point out that you were the first one they pointed a rifle at though that little opening beside their front door?”

“I believe you just did – point it out.”

They walked next door to Cal’s office. A deputy rode up and dismounted. Johnny handed the telegram to him, thinking it was still best if they left things inside to the adults.

“Something just occurred to me, Jerry. If the things B and J make out at the trading post aren’t sent by stage, they have to have some arrangement with a freight company. Let’s stop in at the general store.”

“You understand that I have no idea how those last two statements could possibly be related.”

Johnny smiled and began a trot down the street to the store. Inside, he approached the owner, removing two pennies from his pants pocket.

“Need a couple of sticks of hard candy.”

The man removed the lid from the big candy jar and the boys each made a selection. Jerry hadn't had much experience with candy, but he certainly would not pass up a chance at a piece. He had no idea what was going on. He understood that in such a situation his friend would have said, “How wonderful!” Jerry, however, took a wait and see approach. The wait would not be long.

“We've got to know the Coffelt brothers out at the old trading post. Thinking of riding out that way and just wondered if you had anything that needs to be delivered to them – supplies or anything from the freight company.”

“Afraid not. They've never come into the store, in fact. Not sure how they get their supplies.”

It had answered his question, so after a few phrases of meaningless small talk the boys left.

“Do I get to know what that was all about?” Jerry asked.

“We just established that B & J use some other delivery service – probably both for food and supplies and for transporting the merchandise they create.”

“How's that helpful?”

“I have no idea, but . . .”

“I know, the more information one has the better prepared he is to solve life's challenges.”

“Exactly. That comes from Doc so you know it's true.”

Back outside they saw the two railroad men leaving the Marshal's office so they headed in that direction and were soon inside.

“So?” Johnny asked.

“So, several things. They are a smooth talking pair – probably good salesmen and that's basically what they are. They say they have almost all of the parcels of land they need south of here so they can begin laying track north from the railhead down by Sandy Ford. They were cagy about avoiding my question about which land they hadn't purchased yet. I told them about the fire at Raymond's farm and suggested to them that it would be an incriminating coincidence if any more of the holdouts had similar incidents. They became uneasy during that part of the conversation.”

“And you just let them go?” Johnny said in disgust.

“Can't jail a man on suspicion of doing something you got no proof of.”

Johnny quelled (controlled) his urge to correct the Marshal's grammar – ‘you got’, ‘no proof of’.

“Did you get the names of the property that hasn't yet been purchased?”

“You think I'm some amateur, here?” the Marshal said though a broad smile.

He handed them a list.

“Just three left – including Raymond's place. Did you find out why Raymond didn't want to sell? I hear railroads offer really good money for right of ways – or should that rights of way – hmm, have to check with Cilla.”

May I answer your question?”

“Yes. Sorry, Marshal. Sometimes I . . . well, you know.”

“The land they want would run right down the center of his farm – cut a thirty yard swath. His property is low lying and the rails would be set on a mound as high as ten feet in some places. He would have no way of getting his machinery and horses from one side to the other.”

“You think he’d sell if that problem was solved?”

“I imagine he would. Like you said, the money is really good.”

“You have a quick way of contacting those railroad guys – Wentworth and McCormack?”

“They have their own telegraph address. They check it every day.”

“Contact them and have them meet us at Raymond’s with a check in hand first thing in the morning – adding about twenty-five percent to the original offer. He’ll be ready to sell by then.”

The Marshal and Jerry shared sets of shrugged shoulders. Neither one doubted their friend. They most certainly didn’t understand, but they didn’t doubt him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Johnny had spent the previous evening making a set of drawings that could only become meaningful once he explained what they were.

That morning found him riding the trail south toward Raymond's farm. The Marshal and Jerry were accompanying him. Cal had required additional information about the plan before he would agree to be a party to the meeting. He was satisfied so there he was.

It was a cool humid morning – heaven for a horse. The easy walk they had set at the beginning became a gentle gallop once the boys gave their horses their heads. Gray, the Marshal's horse, older and larger, went along with the younger ones, but clearly would have preferred a slow, steady pace.

At the farm they were met by the deputy who had stayed the night.

"No problems, Marshal. Got a sad family here – a real sad family."

"It's probably your place to tell Raymond about the barn raising on Saturday, Marshal," Johnny said.

It had really been a question and the Marshal nodded, quelling (removing) any hope Johnny had of delivering the good news himself. Johnny loved being the bearer of good news because he saw that as part of his mission in life to make things better and happier for those around him. In that case, he decided, the effect would be the same regardless of who delivered it.

As they dismounted, the Marshal went on to explain to Raymond the reason for their visit.

"Johnny, here, came up with a idea that just may offer a good solution to your standoff with the railroad. Show him what you have, son."

Johnny removed the piece of paper from his saddle bag and spread it out against Diablo's saddle. They gathered around to look and listen to Johnny.

"It seems you are mostly concerned about having no good way to get from one side of your property to the other once the big mound of dirt with the tracks on it is put in place along the creek. Here is a drawing that shows in a rough fashion, how the railroad could build an under pass – a pass through – under the tracks – big enough for a team and wagon. Then, there would be no problem getting back and forth. If they build the mound with a gentle slope like I show here, you can plant it in wheat and be able to harvest it; that way you really won't even be losing much of your useable land."

Raymond took the drawing and studied it. Eventually he nodded and spoke.

"The far side of the farm can be planted in wheat and corn. This side can stay a meadow for the cows and horses. I can hay part of it for the winter. The mound – what you called it – will be like a big, natural fence. I can live with it. Think the railroad guys will go for it?"

"I think you are in the driver's seat on it," the Marshal said. "They'll refuse at first, but you stand your ground."

"Alright, then. I'll give it a try. Can't be worse than things are now."

"Better, even," Johnny said. "See the figure in the lower left corner – that's how much we figure they'll be willing to pay you. If they can't connect to what

they already have south and north of you, they'll be in a major pickle.”

While they waited for Wentworth and McCormack to arrive the Marshal told Raymond about the barn raising. Raymond's eyes watered up. As men will do in such a situation, they all looked away.

The railroad representatives arrived and, just like the Marshal had predicted, refused Raymond's terms. He turned around and went into the house. The Marshal mounted up and, understanding the power-play that was going on, the boys did the same. Before the three of them hit the lane to the trail north toward Red Bend, Wentworth called out.

“Wait. We may be able to talk about this.”

The three riders stopped and turned, looking back. Raymond stepped out onto the porch. They rode back to the gathering.

“The only talk I'll listen to is that you agree to my terms. By the way, that underpass will be the first part of the construction so I'll never be blocked from one side to the other.”

He stood quietly looking at them for a long moment. They made no response. He turned as if to go back inside.

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“I drive a fair bargain and you know it.”

Raymond was clearly determined and his confidence seemed to be growing with every exchange.

He walked to where they were standing beside their horses and handed them Johnny's drawing.

“This is how it must look and this is the amount I'll need to see on your check.”

The two men looked at each other. McCormack nodded and Wentworth wrote out the check. At the bottom he had written, ‘Paid in Full’. Raymond's brow furrowed and he pointed it out to the Marshal as if to ask what it meant.

“It means you will not ask for any more money to cover the agreement.”

Johnny looked at the check and had a suggestion. His lawyer in Kansas City had given him a book all about banking and part of it was about to pay off.

“The law says if one party puts a limitation or stipulation on a check the other has a right to do the same. If I were you, Raymond, I'd add, ‘Covers land and underpass as specified’.”

The Marshal offered a look of approval at Johnny and nodded his agreement toward Raymond. The addition was placed on the check, the legal document was signed, and the railroad men made ready to leave.

Johnny approached them as they mounted up and whispered something to Wentworth. With only a little hesitation the man removed something from his inside coat pocket and handed it to Johnny. Wentworth shot an uneasy glance in the direction of the Marshal and he and McCormack galloped off toward the south at a pace considerably faster than the one at which they had arrived.

“I sure hope you didn't just get me in trouble with the railroad,” the Marshal said looking directly down into Johnny's upturned face.

“Me? Do that to you? Never!”

“Can't settle for that, this time. What just happened between the two of

you? All the details.”

“Oh, just something like we had proof the two of them had burned down the barn using Atherton Railroad kerosene and that we expected them to pay for a new one in lieu of being prosecuted for it.”

Johnny opened his hand toward Raymond, passing him a crisp new folded one hundred dollar bill.

“I imagine that will cover the beams, boards, shake shingles and such,” Johnny said offering a smile.

“That came close – real close – to being on the dishonest side of the ledger, you know, young man,” the Marshal said clearly uneasy about it all.

“I guess I’m known for pushing things ‘*real close*’ sometimes. Don’t tell me that you don’t believe they *are* the barn burners, but that we’d never be able to really prove it. I think it worked out well.”

The Marshal shook his head and turned his horse toward town. That didn’t indicate he approved, but neither did he indicate he didn’t.

Jerry wore an ear to ear grin, celebrating his friend’s complete victory.

Raymond took the check inside to share the good news with his wife and family.

Johnny figured it was just another day in the life of a blossoming storyteller – one day to be a world renowned writer.

Back in town the boys left the Marshal and put up their horses at the livery stable. Johnny needed more information from Mike at the stage office. They were soon there.

“Mike. You have copies of the manifest from the lock box that got stolen after it left here?”

“Sure do. Want to see it?”

“We do. What about the one from the box that was stolen on Jerry’s coach ride – the one from McPherson?”

“Don’t have it. Can get it. Only one telegram away. Got about an hour before the stage starts its run from there to here. They could bring a copy.”

“Let’s look at the manifest you have first. No need for them to send it or to pay to list everything on a return telegram if we only need a few things from it.”

The boys studied the manifest for a few moment, each one pointing here and there as they looked it over. There were seven pouches listed. The manifest told where each pouch entered the lock box and at which station it was to be removed.

Johnny pointed to one entry – diamonds put on the stage at St. Joseph, Missouri, going all the way to California. Jerry pointed to another – ten pounds of assorted broken gold items (jewelry, eye glasses frames, and so on) on their way to the mint in Denver where they would be melted into ingots.

“The thief made out pretty well, I’d say, Johnny said.

Jerry nodded and added, “Somebody had to know those things were on the stage. Inside information, I suppose.”

Johnny turned to Mike.

“Who knows about the contents of the lockboxes?”

“Well, let’s see. Any station agent that opens a box would know from the

manifest. He'd also know if he made the deposit himself – that is, if he took the merchandise from the sender and placed it in a pouch for delivery. He would add it and its contents to the manifest.”

“How many stations between St. Joseph and here?”

Mike did some figuring in his head, eventually producing an answer.

“Seven including St. Joe and Red Bend.”

“That’s a lot of possibilities,” Jerry said.”

“It is,” Johnny agreed. “Alright, Mike, about that telegram. Let’s see if there was any super-valuable merchandise – like gold or diamonds – on that stage that Jerry was riding in from McPherson. Something out of the ordinary.”

Mike scribbled several things on a scrap of paper.

“Here’s the telegraph address. Here’s my security code so they’ll know it’s really from me. You send the telegram. Ask for whatever you need.”

“Sure you should be handing out your security code like that?” Jerry asked, clearly surprised.

“You gonna use it for dishonest purposes?” Mike asked, apparently surprised at the question.

“Well, no. Of course not.”

“Then I see no problem do you?”

Jerry shook his head. “I suppose not.”

He had forgotten things were different – more trusting – out there on the prairie than back in Wichita.

The boys trotted across the street to the telegraph office and the wire was soon sent.

“Who’s tab?” Gus asked.

“I guess since it’s about solving the stage robberies you can charge it to Mike.”

Outside the boys went their separate ways, Jerry back to help Harry at the livery and Johnny into the restaurant to find Doc and lunch.

He soon had the old gentleman caught up on the morning’s activities.

“So you are thinking an inside job, now, are you – the stage robberies.”

“I’m thinking a paid informer or two within the stage company. I doubt if that person – or persons – is the actual brains behind the robberies.”

Doc nodded and added some information for Johnny to consider.

“For the thief to use informers is taking a risk – informers take money for information so they are likely to be open to a bribe to spill the beans about who paid them to anybody who waves some more cash in front of their nose.”

“Interesting. I hadn’t thought of that. Not sure how to pursue it right now. Change of topic. In your scientific catalogues are there magnets for sale – powerful magnets that could lift say five or ten pounds?”

“I’m sure there are. Dare I ask why you need such a devise?”

“You may, but I’d rather you’d wait a few days.”

“You know where I keep the catalogues. Help yourself, then.”

Cilla arrived.

“What’s the state of progress, this morning?”

“More speculation than actual progress, I suppose,” Johnny said.

“Anything more on robberies in the papers?”

“Not that I have found. I did think about one aspect of it all, though. As far as we can ascertain (find out) the only stage line that is being targeted is the Prairie Line. There must be a dozen other lines – Cumberland, Overland, Wells Fargo are all bigger. I have to ask why not them as well? They don’t even have the advanced security setup that Prairie uses.”

“Not that the security system seems to matter to this thief,” Johnny added with a sigh.

“It is an important observation, though,” Doc said, underscoring Cilla’s point.

“I agree,” Johnny said. “I suppose it does narrow things down and it suggests that even the advanced lock box arrangement isn’t a problem for this guy.”

“And that may hold the key to it all,” Doc said, hoping to point the boy in a useful direction.

“Thanks. That focuses the investigation for sure. Any ideas about ferreting out the informers.”

“Not from me, I’m afraid,” Cilla said.

“Nor me. We’ll both continue thinking about it. Have you ruled out the railroad as being the force behind the robberies?”

“Oh, no. They are high on motive, but low on clues. I think we sent two of the railroad guys packing this morning. I imagine we’ll be seeing some new faces as their land purchasing process moves on west and north of Red Bend.”

The upcoming barn raising and the school dance occupied the conversation during the remainder of lunch. Johnny had questions about both. The grown-ups tried to help.

Again, Johnny handed Doc money under the table to cover his meal. Again, Doc gave him the look that said, ‘that wasn’t necessary’. Johnny wanted to pay his own way – and certainly had plenty of money to handle it. Doc respected the boy’s wishes so had stopped making a fuss over it.

After lunch, Johnny stopped at the telegraph office. The wire had arrived from the McPherson Stage Office. The missing lockbox held two pouches each containing 2,000 gold dollar coins.

There were several types of gold dollar coins. Making a quick, rough calculation, Johnny figured they would have probably been the Type 1. It was smaller than a dime so was ideal for sending lots of money as coins in a small container. Four thousand dollars was a huge amount of money (\$120,000 at today’s value).

It was destined for a big company near Denver and had come from the Philadelphia mint to St. Joseph by train where it was transferred to the stage line. Johnny had to wonder several things: why the mode of transportation had been changed? Trains were well known to be safer. Why would a single company need so much money in coin? Maybe Cilla would have an idea. He folded the telegram and put it in his pocket.

His next stop was the newspaper office.

“Need to borrow your book about companies again.”

“Go at it.”

Johnny took out the telegram to make sure he had the name of the company in Denver: *Crocket Jewelry*. He looked it up. They manufactured gold and silver rings, bracelets, broaches and cane caps. It really didn't answer his question so he talked with Cilla.

“I think that's the company that embeds coins into their jewelry – they could feature the small dollar coin in earrings and finger rings, for example.”

“Four thousand of them?”

“There is a big demand for that sort of thing in Europe, I understand. They may have a large overseas market.”

Johnny took her at her word. He had no way of knowing about such things. Anyway, his concern was the robbery, not what some company in Colorado was doing with tiny, valuable, coins once they received them.

He reread the entry in the book more in detail.

“Got the answer two why such a valuable cargo was shipped by stage instead of train. The same man who owns the Prairie Stage Line owns that jewelry company. On fewer things to be concerned about.”

There was another thing that his Aunt had brought up the evening before while he was drawing and they were talking. She wondered if there was any pattern to anything about the maintenance schedule on the stage coaches – any regular times something might be able to be done to a coach or the box. She had nowhere to go with the idea, but Johnny saw it as potentially important.

He went back to talk with Mike at the stage office.

“Is there a regular maintenance schedule for the coaches, and I'm not even sure I know what I'm asking?”

“Wheels, axils and thorough braces (thick leather straps that cradled the coach for a smoother ride – like shocks in today's cars) get a thorough going over once a month. Coaches alternate days for the examination.”

“Do the lockboxes get such an examination?”

“No. What could go wrong with them? Welded iron, iron hinges, strong locks.”

Johnny nodded. What Mike indicated made sense. He turned to leave when one other thing came to mind.

“What about the automatic greaser? Does it get maintenance?”

“Nothing regular. The Stage Office Agent fills up the cylinder with grease when it's needed. The Coffelts come in from time to time and check the coaches that come through on that day – between four and eight depending on lots of things. Slows us down by fifteen minutes. If anything – like the sprocket – needs replacing it can take longer. Actually, all their gadgets are very dependable – seldom need parts replaced.”

“Alright, then. Thanks for all the information.”

His next stop was Doc's catalog library. He found what he needed – a set of powerful horseshoe magnets, each one capable of lifting ten pounds. He wired his order to the company in Kansas City and then had the bank also wire them, guaranteeing payment to speed up the delivery. He had the merchandise sent by train to the railhead south of town near Sandy Ford. It was to get there

the very next afternoon. Johnny was amazed.

He arranged for Jerry to accompany him on the ride the next day – several hours at best. He had the Marshal write a note saying he was Johnny Baker and was there to pick up his package – in case there was any question about Johnny, a kid, being able to pick them up.

As he headed out of town toward home that afternoon, he figured it had been a very good day. He hoped his idea about using the magnets did what he needed it to do and that after it did that, that he found something that would be useful in his investigation. (Nobody but Johnny really understands that last sentence.)

CHAPTER EIGHT

One o'clock the next afternoon found the boys riding south along the trail to the railhead to pick up the package Johnny had ordered – the one containing the magnets. Jerry had not asked for an explanation about their use figuring Johnny would tell him when Johnny was ready to tell him.

They stopped to water the horses at the creek and skip a few stones across the surface of the water. Jerry was always best at that – seven skips in a row that afternoon. Before remounting, Jerry whispered something to Johnny. It was worth a grin. When they returned to the horses each boy intentionally mounted the wrong horse. Pinto and Diablo looked at each other, shook their heads and just stood there not budging so much as an inch as the boys urged them to get on their way.

The boys thought it was hilarious and the exchange back to normal was soon made.

"I wonder what was going through the horses brains during that?" Jerry asked.

"Probably thinking their owners had lost their minds."

At the railhead, Johnny had no trouble getting his package from the station master. It was larger than he anticipated it would be – and heavier. It fit snugly in a saddle bag.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Jerry asked.

"When we get back to your place. Don't want to wear them out."

"What?"

"A joke, my friend. I know they can't be worn out."

* * *

Back in town they went right up to Jerry's room where Johnny opened the package. Each horseshoe shaped magnet was about six inches tall, three wide, and half an inch thick. They were painted red with white tips. He held them end to end. They jumped toward each other and formed a powerful connection.

"So, I got it," Jerry said. "You're going to play horseshoes with the old men at the park and beat them because yours will stick to the iron post and always be closest."

"Very creative," Johnny said. "Here's the reason. Sit back. The explanation may take a while.

"You know that extra little iron box that's connected to the bottom of the well that carries the lockbox?"

Jerry nodded. "The one the cable runs through. We can't figure out why it's there."

"Right and we couldn't find any way to get into it – no hinges, no screws or bolts. A box with no way into it just makes no sense."

"And, there's no opening into it from the inside of the well either," Jerry said. "We searched that well a dozen times."

"That's also correct, *or is it?* There has to be a way into it; what it does I have no idea, but there has to be a way into it and I'm quite sure that has to be from the inside."

“But . . .”

“I know. But there wasn’t any way into it – not from the floor of the well that we could see, that is.”

“Huh? You lost me.”

“Think about it. What if there really is an opening in the bottom of the well into that box, but that real bottom of the well is covered by a tightly fitting iron plate?”

“Ingenious! A false bottom,” Jerry said. “Remove that iron plate and expose the opening.”

“Right. Since there isn’t even room enough to slip a piece of paper in around the outside of that plate – assuming it is a plate – you can’t just get your fingers or some pry bar under it to remove it.”

“I got it, now! The magnets will take hold of the plate and we can pull it up and out.”

“That’s my thinking – my hope, I guess. Now all we have to do is get hold of a stagecoach to examine.”

“Back to the reserve coach in the stable behind the stage office, I guess,” Jerry said clearly getting excited about the idea.

“Let’s put the magnets back in the box. They’d be a bit hard to explain to folks who might see them along the way.”

“Probably not!” Jerry said.

“What do you mean, probably not?”

“In Red Bend there’s very little Johnny Baker could do that would surprise anybody and make them ask any serious questions about it.”

“That’s my reputation is it?”

“Oh, yes. People think you’re great, don’t get me wrong, it’s just that you’re seen as being a bit *odd* you might say.”

“Odd! I like odd! Sure wouldn’t want to be just like everybody else.”

“Correction, Johnny. You wouldn’t want to be just like *anybody* else.”

Johnny nodded. His friend knew him very well. Being his own person was one of the most important things to Johnny.

* * *

“So, Mike. We need a favor.”

“Anything, and I realize I may live to regret that offer.”

He offered a smile. Johnny returned it and went on.

“Need to spend some more time in that reserve coach if that’s alright?”

“Of course. That coach has been popular today.”

“Marshal been looking it over again?” Johnny asked.

“Nope. The Coffelt brothers came by this morning to do some routine maintenance on the greaser. They’re always very secretive about that. I suppose to guard any secrets about how it works. Anyway, they’re gone ‘til about three o’clock tomorrow afternoon when the stage comes in from Great Bend. It has a layover here until five when it heads on east to McPherson. There’s seldom a layover like that, but once in a while passengers from several other runs need to make connections with each other. That’s the case tomorrow. While they work on the greaser on the regular coach, we’ll roll out the reserve

and make it ready for the trip on east at five. Jake says it may take several days to refit a new grease delivery system on that coach. They just keep improving things.”

“That how it’s usually done?”

“Not usually, but Bart said they had noticed a problem of some kind on Number 88 – that’s the coach coming in tomorrow at three – and thought it might take more time to fix than usual. Considerate, I’d say – not wanting to slow down the stage runs.”

“Sounds like it. It shouldn’t take us very long. Can we have the key to the lock box well?”

Mike handed it over without any questions. The boys moved through the office and out the back door. They walked the ten yards to the stable. The wrangler was there grooming the horses, but Johnny figured they’d be able to keep him out of the way. He didn’t want anybody knowing what they were up to.

To set the wrangler’s mind at ease, Jerry approached him and explained that Mike said they could take a look at the stage. Johnny climbed into the coach and Jerry soon joined them. They closed the door for privacy and soon had the carpet moved and the lid unlocked and open.

Jerry removed the magnets from the box and handed them to Johnny who placed them on the floor of the well.

“You pull on the right one. I’ll take the left. On three. One, two, three. Easy does it.”

As much as Johnny believed he had to be right about the setup, he still acted surprised as the floor plate remained attached to the magnets and allowed them to remove it. They placed it aside on one of the seats.

As one, they pointed to what they saw at the bottom of the well. Several things became clear at the same moment.

“There’s the opening into the smaller box that we knew had to be there,” Jerry said, suddenly taking ownership of Johnny’s contention about it.

“That box contains a counter mechanism,” Johnny added. “I was sure that’s what I heard the other night.”

He lowered his head into the well to get a better look.

“It is set at Zero Four One – only counts into the hundreds – just three places. The forty one represents the number of times you rotated the wheel the other night. That counter will only count up to a little over two miles – only 999 turns of the wheel. The counter on the greaser on the back of the coach has five places so it could count up to 99,999 or about 250 miles. (99,999 divided by 425 the number of wheel turns in one mile from a wheel with a circumference of 12.5 feet.)

“So?”

“So, look here.”

Johnny pointed to a latch mechanism within the little box. It seemed to be supporting the rear wall of the well.

“Let’s see what happens when it gets released.”

He pulled it back. The rear wall of the well, which looked in every way to be welded to the sides and bottom, sprung open – out at the bottom on hidden

hinges across the top. The weld seams were fake.

"We no longer have to wonder why the cable runs through this box. It works this counter as well as the one on the back of the coach. There is a knob that can be turned to connect and disconnect the cable from the counter. When engaged, and the counter hits some pre-set number, it pulls the latch back and opens the door."

Jerry continued the line of thinking.

"And when that happens, the inner box slides out and drops to the ground – or onto the road in this case."

"And then, the thief comes along after the stagecoach is out of sight, picks up the box and leaves with no trace."

"Ingenious, for sure. It has to be Bart and Jake Coffelt," Jerry said. "It's all their gadgetry."

"And," Johnny continued, "It's probably the whole reason behind the greaser – just an excuse to open the lockbox well to set up the robberies."

"Do we go tell the Marshal and watch him arrest them?" Jerry asked.

"Not yet. We still need to find out who the inside man is. We'll need to think on that a while. Let's get this thing back together very carefully so the bad guys will never know we've tampered with it."

They locked the lid and replaced the carpet. Back inside the station Johnny handed the key to Mike and thanked him.

"Got one more question. Do you know the dates when the greaser was serviced on the stages that were robbed?"

"I can get them for you. I have that information here on the one that was robbed on its way from Red Bend to McPherson – coach number 27. I'll wire McPherson and get that other date for you. Should know by supper time. Let's see . . . the one from here – now ain't that a coincidence – it was the reserve coach and it had been serviced that very morning."

"Thanks for all your help, Mike. Please don't tell anybody we've been looking at the coach or what questions we've been asking – not even the Coffelt brothers. No need to upset them."

"I understand. Nobody will hear it from me."

"You have any way of knowing what's in a stage's lockbox before it gets here," Johnny asked.

"No. Well, I know what I'll be adding to it but that's all."

"You have anything really valuable to add to any run in the next few days?"

"Lots of cash from the bank on tomorrow's run east – the five o'clock through McPherson. Ranchers often bring in large amounts of cash they get from the sale of their cattle. It can be as much as five or ten thousand dollars. The bank doesn't like to keep a great deal of money on hand way out here in the middle of nowhere so it sends it to its account in the regional federal bank back in K.C."

"Do you notify anybody at the coach line when something valuable like that will be in the box?"

"No. Just handle it like any other pouch."

"Thanks again. See you later. Remember, it's our secret."

Mike nodded and zipped his lips.

Outside, Jerry remembered something about his stage ride.

"I suppose you noticed that there were two guards – shotguns – riding the stage I came in on; the one that was robbed between McPherson and here."

"I do now that you mention it. There is usually only one. What's your point?"

"I'm thinking somebody has to be in charge of adding guards to runs that carry valuable cargo."

"I see where you're going with it. Even though nobody in the company is told about valuable shipments, they probably are told about the assignment of the extra guard. That would certainly be a tip off that the shipment is special in some way."

They turned around in their tracks and reentered the stage office.

"Mike. Need to pester you again. Who assigns the extra guard to the runs that carry extra valuable cargo?"

"The local stage agent – me in the case of Red Bend."

"Anybody else know about it?"

"Always telegraph the main office so they can make sure all the stations have the number of guards on hand that they need. In other words, when I lose one to a double run like that, the main office transfers one to me as a replacement – usually on the next stage due in here."

"Let me be sure I understand. So, even though you station agents don't let the main office know about valuable cargo, you do let them know when you assign an extra guard to a run."

"That's right."

Clearly, Mike still didn't make the connection that Johnny and Jerry had made.

"Do you happen to know who that contact is at the main office?"

"Telegrams are sent Re: William; that's all I know."

"And that main office is in Kansas City, right?"

"Right. Northwest edge of the city. Quick and easy in and quick and easy out up there."

"Thanks again," Johnny said and the boys left.

"Let's share what we have with the Marshal," Johnny suggested.

Jerry entered first.

"Marshal," Jerry began, "are you ready for the most convoluted (complicated) clue you've ever heard?"

"You're saying Johnny has been thinking again."

Jerry just grinned. It was Johnny's signal to speak.

"Here's the deal. It has become obvious to us that there has to be an inside connection – inside the stage line – in order for the thieves to know which stages to rob."

"Thieves – plural, is it now?" the Marshal said picking up on Johnny's phrasing.

"Yes, sir. Plural. Hear me out."

“Don’t I always hear you out?”

“Yes you do and I appreciate that. Lots of adults just turn off kids when we’re talking. Anyway, back to our educated hunch. When a local stage agent adds some really valuable pouch to a run, he also adds a second guard – shotgun rider – and he alerts the main office in KC so they can reassign another guard to that station.

“In that way, the KC office is really always alerted to valuable shipments even when they aren’t alerted to valuable shipments. Make sense?”

“Believe it or not, it does. What you’re saying is that if there is an inside informant, the person receiving that information about the addition of a second guard at the main office would be the best bet.”

“Right, and very well done for a grown up.”

There were smiles all around.

“We assume you can make a discrete (hush-hus) inquiry to find out who that is. The name just may be William somebody.”

“The Chief Marshal’s office certainly can do that. Let me write a telegram.”

The boys smiled and chuckled when they saw what he had written on the sheet of paper.

Attention: Blake Carter, Chief Marshal. Bla, bla, bla, etc.

“Bla, bla, bla?” Johnny said/asked.

“You’ll just change anything I write down anyway, so I figured this was a more efficient way to operate.”

“We do have a good understanding about things, don’t we, Marshal?”

Cal raised his eyebrows and brushed at the boys with the back of his hand indicating they should leave and take care of business.

They did, making a beeline for the telegraph office. Johnny took a moment to complete the question on the sheet and handed it to Gus.

“This one’s on the Marshal – sign his name to it.”

It was soon accomplished.

The boys went outside and made their way back to the livery stable. While they cleaned stalls they fashioned a plan.

“If our hunches are correct,” Johnny began, “the coach going from here to McPherson will be robbed tomorrow soon after it leaves Red Bend – no more than two miles because that’s as far as the counter in the little box can count. Assuming the Marshals over in KC are as effective as our Cal Calvin, they will have that William fellow spilling his guts, incriminating the Coffelt brothers, and in custody by nightfall today.

“We need to catch them in the act and that means we just need to shadow the stagecoach on its five o’clock run toward McPherson. I’m even very sure I know where the box will be dropped.”

“How can you be sure of that?” Jerry asked.

“You’ll understand when we see it happening.”

“Seems like you’re getting right down to the nitty-gritty, huh?” Jerry said.

“We, not me, my friend. We’re getting right down to the nitty-gritty. Without your observation about the extra guard we’d still be nowhere as far as

the inside connection went.”

Jerry understood it was still really ninety percent Johnny, but he would gladly take whatever credit might be legitimately due him. Johnny always made him feel like he was an important part of the team, but then Johnny always seemed to make everybody feel like they were important.

Harry invited Johnny to stay for supper, but he declined thinking he hadn't spent much time with his Aunt that week. Anyway, he had a hankerin' for some of her good home cooking. It was almost seven by the time he had Diablo and his aunt's horse 'tucked in' for the night.

He stopped just inside the door before closing it behind him, and sniffed the air.

“Pot roast and peach cobbler,” he said offering his best guess.

“Almost. Pot roast and peach pie. Hope that's no great disappointment.”

“Never a disappointment when it's your cooking, Aunt Bea.”

“Seems you've had a busy week,” she said hoping to get caught up on his comings and goings without specifically asking like a nosey old aunt might do.

“The stagecoach robberies. Been baffling right up until today. We should have it all wrapped up by this time tomorrow.”

“Without putting yourself in terrible danger, I hope,” she said.

“Me? Danger? Whatever could you mean by that?”

They shared a chuckle, but Johnny received the message – *be careful*. It seemed like every adult he knew kept telling him that. He wondered why. It wasn't like he ever tried *not* to be careful!

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning over breakfast at Doc's table in the restaurant, Johnny laid out to his three 'grown-up' friends all he had discovered – the false bottom, the use of the magnets, the smaller counter box, the latch, the hidden swinging door, the fake weld lines, and so on.

"And, Marshal, I'm quite sure you will find that the lock box will be dropped right where the trail crosses the road from south to north – the one leading up to the old Trading Post. It will happen about twelve minutes into the stage run – give or take 25 feet or thirty seconds."

"If experience hadn't shown us the boy was usually right, I'd say he was just being cocky," the Marshal said.

"I'm betting on the boy," Doc said, offering a wink across the table at Johnny.

"And I as well," Cilla said.

"Hey, I'm not betting against him," the Marshal said as if he thought he were being ganged up on.

"Sunset's at about five this afternoon," Johnny began again. "It'll be mostly dark out on the road when the box is dropped. That will mean you will have less chance of being seen by the bad guys. I assume you will wait in the shadows until they actually come to pick it up."

"That's the plan," the Marshal said.

Johnny had a final suggestion.

"I figure you need to have a deputy waiting – hidden – up their lane to be able to testify they were waiting there for the stage to pass. Otherwise they could say they were just out for a ride and came upon the box in the center of the road."

"A good suggestion. I plan to have half a dozen deputies spread out along the main route. Not that I don't trust your calculations, son, but just in case that latch mechanism you discovered might get jostled loose and the drop happens sooner than expected."

"I'll accept that as caution on your part rather than as distrust of my calculations."

"I thought that's what I just said."

"And *now* we all agree to it."

Johnny offered a smile around the table as he stood to leave.

"Got stuff," he said. "I'm going to try and spring Jerry from Harry and take advantage of this warm day for a swim up at the falls on Sunday Creek. Won't be many more nice warm swimming days left this Fall."

As one voice, the three of them said, "Be Careful!"

Jerry chuckled. He wasn't bothered by their 'order'. He took it as a signal they cared about his safety and that meant he was important to them. It was always good to feel you were important to someone.

"Breakfast is on the Marshal's office, today," Cal said. "Tell Jerry I owe him one, too."

"Will do."

Johnny turned to leave and then turned back around pointing to each of them.

“Now . . . you three . . . *Be Careful!*”

He laughed himself out of the restaurant, thinking that turning the tables like that had been hilarious.

Jerry was tossing hay down from the loft at the front of the building. Johnny picked up arms full and delivered them to the various stalls.

Once that was finished, they filled the food troughs with a scoop of oats each and Jerry’s morning duties were finished. They were soon on the road out of town – west. It was only nine o’clock.

They swam and talked for nearly two hours. It seemed they never really ever finished a conversation. One topic just flowed into another and then another. It was how it was between friends. Just talking together about things – important and trivial – was often more important than finding answers.

They enjoyed the lunch Aunt Bea had sent along and were back in town by a little after noon.

Jerry turned in to the livery and Johnny went on down the street to the Marshal’s office.

“Heard back about the possible informant in the Kansas City office?”

“Yes, I did. It came in last evening. Not sure what you put in that telegram to the Chief Marshal, but it certainly lit a fire under him. You’ll need to give me lessons. Sometimes it takes days for me to get a response.”

“What can I say? When you got it you got it!”

“*It* being a line of baloney a mile long, I’m thinking.”

“Doc says we all need our protein.”

They let the topic drop with a groan.

“What time we leaving this evening?” Johnny asked.

“We?”

“You know that one way or another I’ll be there, so I’m sure, like you’ve said before, you’d rather have me with you than lurking around by myself.”

“Four thirty. That’ll give me – us – time to get everybody in place. I figured we’ll stick to the woods on the south side of the road. That will keep us well away from the trading post.”

He paused as if expecting some come back from Johnny.

“Good thinking. Keep it up and you’ll soon be as sneaky as I am.”

Again, the topic was dropped even though the Marshal was certain no one would ever be as sneaky as ‘the boy’.

“I’ll be back at four, then. Have one more thing to take care of before tonight and you don’t need to say it. I know. *Be Careful!*”

“That’s our goal, you know,” the Marshal said.

“That comment makes no sense in the context of our conversation.”

“*Our* – the adults in your life – have the *goal* – objective – that *you* – Johnny Baker – will begin giving yourself *the safety message* – BE CAREFUL! I think I just heard it. So, *that’s our goal* for you. You got it?”

“I do got it – er, get it – and I thank you for that precise explanation.”

Johnny left, mounted Diablo, and headed east along the road that the

stage would be traveling that evening. A half mile out of town he turned north through the undergrowth heading in the general direction of the old trading post.

'This is probably not, *being careful*,' he said to himself, 'but at least I am aware of it.'

He figured the more evidence he had against the Coffelts the better. He was in search of magnets – the necessary accessory for raising the false bottom in the lock box well – something they seemed to be planning to do regularly. Mike said the men would be at the stage station that afternoon to service the greaser on the reserve coach. He figured it would be at that time when they would be setting and engaging the counter in the small box attached to the bottom of the well so the lockbox would fall out at the proper place – some pre-set number of wheel turns.

Needing to service the regular coach, which would be arriving that afternoon, was just a ruse (trick or excuse) so the reserve – the one they would have all set up to drop the box – would be sure to be used. That seemed to have been the plan on the first robbery out of McPherson.

Upon reaching the big old building, Johnny left Diablo untethered in a stand of trees so he could move around and graze if he were hungry. At nearly fourteen, himself, Johnny spent a lot of time thinking about such things (being hungry, not grazing!).

He understood it was possible that they only had one set of magnets and that they would have them with them in town. More likely, however, they would have a spare – they seemed to be very careful, very well prepared and thorough men.

The windows in the trading post building were heavily draped and Johnny could not see inside. He moved around to the west side of the smaller building in the rear – the one in which Jerry had his close call with the men. The front door was padlocked but through a window he could see across the large, well lit room to the back door – double doors. There was a single metal rod inserted into the hasp lock (look up) which effectively kept it locked from the inside.

Johnny had an idea. He returned to Diablo and retrieved the magnets from the saddlebag. He went back to those double doors on the north side of the building. His hope was that his magnets would be strong enough to work right through the wooden door and 'suck' that metal rod up and out of the lock. It was not an easy task because he had to guess exactly where it was on the inside. He worked for some time before hearing the 'clunk' that indicated he had succeeded – the rod had fallen free. He hung one magnet from each of his rear pants pocket – they were too large to fit inside.

He worked the doors in and out until the hasp freed into two sections at which time he could push them open. He closed them behind him and went to the front to look out the window and make certain nobody was around.

Next, he began going through the doors and cabinets in the part of the room, which was clearly used for metal work.

Eventually, there was just one drawer left. He opened it. There they were; two large magnets. They were each four inches square with a handle on top. He understood they were many times more powerful than the horseshoe

designed magnets he had. He closed the drawer and continued snooping.

Presently, he became fully absorbed in several gadgets he figured were inventions in the development stage. He tried to figure out just what purposes they might serve. He had let his attention wander – never a good thing when snooping in places you had no business being.

Suddenly, he heard a noise at the front door. He hurried toward the doors at the rear. As he reached to push one of them open, it opened on its own. Well, not really. It had been Bart pulling on it from the outside.

When nothing else comes to mind, babble.

“Oh. Hello, Sir. This is a great shop you have here. Like I told you earlier I’m something of an inventor myself. Thought I’d look around while you were out – that way I wouldn’t be underfoot while you were engaged in your research. You buying any of this jibber-jabber?”

He had been droning on to buy time to think. Once his babbling had been set in motion the rest of his brain seemed to be free to go on thinking about other things – in that case escaping with his life.

“What you really doing?” Jake asked. He had entered from the front and carried a rifle.

“Like I said . . .”

“Don’t buy the ‘like I said stuff,’ kid,” Jake said raising his gun toward Johnny’s stomach.

“God already gave me one belly button. You don’t need to give me another one. We can talk this thing out.”

“What’s this in your pockets?” Bart asked, removing the magnets.

“I’m sure a bright guy like you knows horseshoes when he sees them.”

Bart showed them to his brother.

“Magnets. What would he be doing with magnets?”

“Opening your back doors, for one thing, sir. You must be more careful in the future. Just never know when some magnet-wielding guy might drop by for a look at things in here.”

Jake shoved him up against the rear wall and raised the end of the barrel to his neck.

“I’ll count five, he said.”

“Certainly glad you can count that far. Just one more and you’ll make it to a half dozen or 6/13ths of the way to a baker’s dozen (13).”

“The kid has a smart mouth, Bart. Need to do something about that.”

“I’ll tie him up. You keep the gun on him. If he tries to escape let him have it.”

“By ‘it’ I assume you don’t mean, ‘let him have the escape’.”

“What he means is let you have a taste of hot lead,” Jake went on.

“Oh, no thank you. Already had that; upper right chest. I can show you the great scar it left if you’d like to see it.”

Fed up with Johnny’s jabbering, Jake raised the butt of the gun and hit Johnny on the back of his head. As he fell to the floor on his way into unconsciousness he caught a glimpse of Diablo looking in through the front window.

The next thing Johnny knew he was fading in and out of consciousness, waking up, tied to a large chair, which was in turn tied to one of the large, wooden, work benches. His feet were bound to the front legs, his chest to the back of the chair and his hands tied together behind him. He had a terrible head ache.

“I got a terrible head ache, here, he said out loud.” (see!)

The right shoulder of his shirt was soaked in blood. Turning his head he could see out the window.

“Looks to be about three,” he said, again out loud.

It suddenly dawned on him that Bart and Jake had left. He was there alone as if that seemed to really help. Somewhere the men had learned how to bind a person to a chair in a most effective manner. He couldn't scoot toward a door because of the way he was also attached to the heavy work bench. He saw his magnets on top of the bench.

The men had apparently left in a hurry because the rear doors had not been locked by inserting the iron rod back into the hasp – as if that seemed to be of any help to him.

It was at that moment he saw it. Diablo looking through a rear window. Better still, there was a second face – Jerry.

Johnny hitched his head for his friend to enter. His face disappeared and he was immediately slipping in between the two doors.

“Seems like I've already done that once,” he said as he approached Johnny.

“I imagine you understand what happened here,” Johnny said.

“I do and I imagine with just a little thought you will also understand what happened at my end. By the way, you look absolutely awful, pal. Need to get that shirt into cool water right away.”

“My shirt? What about me?”

“Alright. You can get into cool water, also.”

“Under other circumstances you know what I'd do,” Johnny said pretending to put on a huff over Jerry's remark.

“Yes. You'd attack me. We'd roll around the ground for a while pretending to beat the tar out of each other but, all quite carefully never harming a single hair on each other's, heads.”

“Just so you know. Boy! I have the headache of all headaches.”

With the ropes off, Johnny stood up – well, he tried to stand up, but his knees buckled under him. Jerry rushed to give him support.

“My plan this time, Johnny,” Jerry said. “We'll get you onto Diablo, head for the creek, get your wound washed out and get ourselves back to town so Doc can take a look at you.”

“One of your better plans, I'd say. Don't forget our magnets there on the bench.”

Diablo met them at the door. Johnny reached out and patted his face.

“So, Diab, if I were to guess, I'd say you saw I was in trouble and went to get Jerry. Nice going old friend! What boy would ever need a dog if they had you?”

Jerry helped him up into the saddle, mounted up himself, and led the way toward the creek, which was less than a half mile to the west. Jerry helped him out of his shirt and put it to soak in the water. He then poured handful after handful of water over the open, bleeding, bruise on the back of Johnny's head.

"Wide, but not really very deep. Doubt if it'll need stitches. Head wounds bleed profusely (a lot) so it's not as bad as it looks. That's a good thing I can tell you from personal experience."

Johnny could have offered a comment from his own experience, but chose to let it go.

With the cut cleaned out and the shirt wrung nearly dry, Jerry helped him back into his shirt. They figured it would dry in the air as they rode. They mounted up and headed back to town.

"There's absolutely no blood left on that shirt. How did you do that?" Johnny asked.

"Cold water removes blood. Hot water sets blood. I've bled all over my clothes often enough to have learned that lesson long ago."

Johnny wouldn't ask why he bled so often, but he thought it confirmed his belief that Jerry had been badly mistreated as a little boy – not by his father, but by the other ranch hands. Jerry never spoke of those things and Johnny would never pry into what were clearly painful memories.

* * *

"Nice job at cleaning the wound, boys," were Doc's first words after his preliminary examination. Johnny sat quietly there on the examination table where he had sat so often during his first month in Red Bend.

"The first aid was all Jerry's doing."

Jerry smiled and explained.

"Just like cleaning a wound on one mule that had been kicked by another," he said, moving back a step as if to avoid a roll on the floor with his friend.

"Luckily," Doc said offering his own smile in Jerry's direction, "Johnny's skull is *far* thicker than any mules I've ever met!"

CHAPTER TEN

With a circle of hair shaved from the back of his head (every thirteen year old boy's wish just before the biggest dance of the year!) and a fresh, white, gauze and tape bandage in place, the boys were off to meet the Marshal and his deputies to write the final chapter in the Mystery of the Baffling Stagecoach Robberies.

Johnny adjusted his hat so Doc's fancy work was mostly covered. He spoke to Jerry as they turned onto Main Street toward the Marshal's office on horseback.

"You may have to do most of the talking. I'm still really light headed and whatever you do, don't let me faint and fall off of Diablo."

Jerry agreed with a nod, believing there would very likely be nothing he could do if his friend started to take a nose dive. Regardless, he kept Pinto in close.

The Marshal and his deputies had just mounted up. The Marshal glanced west up Main as if wondering why the boys had not arrived. When he saw them enter the street he waved, turned east, and led the troop out of town.

Along the way, one at a time, the deputies turned off the road and slipped into the deep shadows of the woods along the south side of the road.

The sun had just made its way below the horizon at their backs and the long shadows they had been casting on the road ahead melded into the gathering darkness. The night sky was filled with dark clouds and the moon drifted in and out behind them. Presently, it was just the Marshal and the boys. They turned south into the stand of trees and bushes that stood just off the intersection of the trail from the south and the main road that ran east and west between the towns.

"What about the deputy that was supposed to be up the lane toward the trading post?" Johnny asked. (So much for his inability to talk for himself!)

"Sent him out several hours ago so he'd be there well before the Coffelt brothers arrived."

Johnny nodded his approval *or* his understanding *or* both. Regardless, he discovered nodding his head was a really bad idea. The world seemed to swim in front of him for several moments.

They were soon ten feet into the shadows. They dismounted and tethered the horses behind them. Diablo, seeming to sense all was not well with his young master, tried to stick close, but the tether kept him back.

Uncharacteristically, Johnny opted to sit on a fallen log while the others stood. Periodically the Marshal checked his large pocket watch.

"Five o'clock," he announced at last.

"I have every reason to believe the stage will leave on time," Johnny said. "It is a mark of pride for Mike. It'll be in sight in eleven minutes and will drop the lock box in our laps in twelve."

The Marshal raised his eyebrows at Jerry who had been standing close behind Johnny. Jerry gave no response. If he were a betting man, his money would have been on 5:12 sharp, however.

They heard the stage a few moments before they could see it in the dim light of the evening sky. Suddenly, there it was. The horses were setting an easy gallop. One guard was riding shotgun up beside the driver. The other sat on top, facing the rear, his legs hanging down over the luggage rack. Both held their rifles at the ready as if they may have been alerted to the fact something bad might happen.

Presently, the stage hurried by in a cloud of dust with the familiar clatter of iron rims against the stones in the road. The three of them waited in complete silence. Jerry moved back to the horses to keep them calm and quiet.

Johnny stood up and the Marshal nudged him in the ribs (not really a good thing, considering) and pointed down at the road in front of them as the moon broke through above. There it was – the iron box, the inner iron box and it was exactly where Johnny had predicted it would be – dead center in the intersection of the trail and the road.

The Marshal shook his head and patted Johnny on the shoulder. Men needed no more between them at a time like that.

A moment later two riders appeared south out of the lane across the way. The second led a pack horse – one they must have picked up in town since Johnny had not seen it when he was at the trading post earlier in the day.

They dismounted and in what looked like a well-practiced set of movements, picked up the relatively heavy box, set it on the back of the pack horse in a specially fashioned carrying arrangement, and strapped it in place. They remounted and turned north ready to move back toward the trading post.

The Marshal pointed in a most deliberate manner indicating that the boys should remain where they were. He would get no argument from Johnny who still found it a struggle just to remain standing.

Then, gun drawn, Cal moved out onto the road behind the two riders.

“Don’t reach for your rifles, gentleman,” he said in a clear, forceful voice. “This is Marshal Calvin. Dismount and lay face down on the road.”

Jake dropped the lead rope and bent forward in his saddle as if he were going to make a run for it up the lane toward the trading post.

The deputy who had been hiding there appeared on horseback and stopped five yards away from them blocking the trail. Jake tugged on the reins clearly wanting to guide his horse back down the road toward town. Six deputies, riding in two rows of three met him before he could move.

Bart dismounted first and took the position on the road. With just a bit more hesitation, Jake followed suit, all the time sputtering indistinguishable muttering at his brother. Laying there the men’s heads were headed south facing the boys who moved out onto the road.

“You!” Jake said seeing Johnny and spitting in his direction.

He turned toward his brother.

“I told you we should have done him in when we could.”

“And be charged with murder as well as grand theft of federal property?” the Marshal said.

“Federal?” Jake asked.

The Marshal tried to clarify.

“William could point you toward which stages to attack, but he had no way of knowing that the money on board was on its way to a federal bank – so, yes, a federal crime.”

“I don’t understand how you tracked us down,” Bart said looking up at the Marshal. “We had the perfect plan.”

The Marshal took Johnny by his shoulders and guided him out in front of him.

“Let me introduce you to your downfall. You can just call him ‘J’. He’s the one who put everything together.”

Jake screamed at his brother.

“I told you! I told you! But no, you said you liked the kid. That he reminded you of yourself at his age. See where that got us?”

Johnny – that is, ‘J’ – spoke.

“I didn’t do it alone. My best friend here helped a lot. You can call him – well, come to think of it, I guess you can call him ‘J’, too.”

The deputies put the two men on their horses and headed for town. The others followed.

* * *

Two weeks later the boys were having breakfast at Doc’s table – still on the Marshal’s office tab. The Marshal was the last to arrive. He was carrying two envelopes.

“First,” he began, “you will be pleased to hear that Bart and Jake were convicted and each received 30 year sentences in a federal prison. At their ages they’ll never see the outside world again.

There were smiles all around. The Marshal cleared his throat and continued. He looked directly at Johnny.

“Second. Johnny, you are really going to hate this. Jerry, I imagine not quite so much.”

The boys looked at each other and then at Doc and Cilla. They all wore puzzled expressions. The Marshal handed the envelopes to Johnny and took a seat. One was from the Marshal’s Service and the other from a Kansas City Law firm with which Johnny wasn’t familiar. Since they had both been addressed to Johnny in care of the Marshal, Cal had opened them.

‘What trouble did I get us into this time?’ Johnny wondered to himself.

He opened the one from the Marshal’s Service first. Without hesitation he began reading it out loud – had no secrets from his friends (well, maybe one or two!). It was addressed to both of the boys.

Dear Sirs:

The boys looked at each other and grinned.

“Seems we’ve been knighted, *Sir Jerry.*”

He read on.

This is to inform you that due to your singularly crucial role in the capture and conviction of Jake and Bart Coffelt, you will receive the full share of the reward to split as you see fit between you. It amounts to five thousand dollars (\$150,000 dollars today).

The rest of the letter went on to detail how the money would be transferred

to them. Johnny shook his head. The last thing he needed or wanted was *more* money. It just kept being thrown at him from out of the blue.

“Disgusting!” he said out loud pounding the table with both hands clinched.

Only Jerry, there at the table, didn’t understand.

He slumped down into his chair and opened the second envelope with a long, deep sigh. It was a legal looking document from lawyers – as it turned out, Bart and Jake’s lawyers.

Johnny Baker: Bart and Jake Coffelt hereby transfer to you this deed for their Automatic Greasing Mechanism. All further revenues from this invention, not restricted only to stage coaches, but to any and all future applications, will come to you.

(Bachelor Bart had, indeed, liked ‘the boy’.)

“This is *awful!*” Johnny said. “That could mean I might be stuck with hundreds of thousands of more dollars. What’s this world coming to when a kid can’t just be a kid?”

* * *

In the end it was agreed that all the reward money from the Chief Marshal’s office would be given to Jerry. Doc would help him set up a bank account similar to the arrangement Johnny had and help him learn about managing it.

“Five thousand dollars,” Jerry said, repeating what the letter had indicated. “That will probably be enough to buy a set of clothes for every day of the week – right?”

The others broke into laughter and continued until tears were streaming down their faces. Jerry joined in, but only because laughter was so infectious – not because he had any improved idea about the value of money. But then, who needed money when you had such good and helpful friends!

Not long afterward, Johnny enjoyed the dance with Clare, bandage and all; Jerry gradually learned about money and insisted on reimbursing Johnny for that meal he had underpaid; School started and the boys continued their studies. Doc the doctor, doctored; Cilla the editor, edited; Cal the Marshal, Marshaled; and although the number of cases around Red Bend needing to be solved decreased, who could predict when there just might be a new edition of, *Doc and Johnny’s Old West Mysteries*.

The end

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