

WIND RIVER



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For Barbara Puechner

Chapter 1

With the train rocking and swaying beneath his booted feet, Cole Tyler lounged in the open doorway of the boxcar and watched the rugged landscape of Wyoming Territory roll past. He was looking south, toward Big Buffalo Wash and the arid flats beyond that long gouge in the earth. Far in the distance, a nameless range of hills made a faint blue line on the horizon.

By turning his head, Cole could look through the open door on the other side of the car and see the peaks of the Wind River Mountains far to the north, almost lost in the haze of distance. More than once he had ridden through the Wind River range and enjoyed the harsh but beautiful landscape. If there had been time, he might have gone up there again. . . .

But there was work to be done: a railroad to be built, a continent to be bridged. His part in this was a small one, sure, but he had never been the sort to neglect a job once he had taken it on.

A sharp whinny from one of the stalls in the converted baggage car drew his attention, and he turned away from the door to go to the big golden sorrel.

Cole reached over the gate of the makeshift stall and rubbed the horse's nose. "Don't worry, Ulysses," he assured the animal. "You'll be able to stretch your legs soon. We'll be getting to the railhead in a little while, and then you'll get a chance to run."

The sorrel tossed his head impatiently, and Cole smiled. He understood how Ulysses felt. He was getting a little restless himself.

A well-built man of medium height, Cole had gray-green eyes that were accustomed to looking over long distances. Since the end of the War Between the States a little over three years earlier, he had wandered over a good chunk of the country west of the Mississippi, scouting for the army, guiding wagon trains, and doing a little buffalo hunting. That was his job now—helping to provide meat for the thousands of workers laying the rails that stretched ever farther to the west.

He wore buckskins and high-topped black boots, and a brown hat with a broad brim and a round crown hung on the back of his neck from its chin-strap. Thick brown hair that had been hacked off squarely fell to his shoulders. He was clean shaven, his features regular and deeply tanned. The Colt conversion revolver holstered on his right hip and the Winchester '66 snugged in his saddle-boot were both .44s, using the metallic cartridges stored in the loops of the shell belt around his waist. A heavy-bladed Green River knife, one of the few legacies of his mountain-man father, was sheathed on his left hip. Wrapped up in oilcloth in the pile of gear next to the stall was the massive Sharps .50 caliber rifle used for hunting buffalo.

As Cole resumed looking out the door of the railroad car, the stock tender came up behind him and commented, "Mighty ugly country, ain't it?"

Cole looked around in surprise. "Ugly?" he echoed. "Not so's you'd notice."

The hostler frowned and gestured at the semi-arid terrain. "But there's nothin' out there."

"Not much," Cole agreed. "But that doesn't make a place ugly."

It was true there wasn't much to be seen here in southern Wyoming except miles and miles of open country bordered here and there by rugged mountains that seemed to fling themselves up from the plains.

Indians lived here, of course; the Sioux and the Shoshone had been in these parts for a long time. And there were a few ranchers moving in, cattlemen who were either brave enough or foolhardy enough to think they could make a go of a spread in this nearly desolate wilderness.

Forts were scattered across the territory, a reminder that the Oregon Trail ran through here and soldiers had been needed in the past to protect what had seemed like an endless stream of settlers and Conestoga wagons, bound for what sounded like the Promised Land.

There weren't many wagon trains these days, and treaties had been signed between the Indians and

the politicians in Washington City—not that either side really abided by those treaties all the time or had ever intended to. Wyoming Territory was still pretty wild country most of the time.

The railroad aimed to change that. The Union Pacific was moving inevitably westward, just as the Central Pacific had started on the West Coast and was coming east. Somewhere, sooner or later, the two would meet, and east and west would be finally, permanently joined, ensuring the spread of civilization.

Or at least that was the plan, Cole mused with a faint smile as he watched the landscape roll past. But civilization might have finally met its match in Wyoming.

He turned his head and asked the stock tender, "Didn't you say there's a town already set up at the railhead?"

"That's what I've heard," the young man answered. "A real live, gen-u-ine town with a name and everything." He pointed through the other door at the far-off peaks to the north. "Named it after the mountains. They're calling the place Wind River."

* * *

"I tell you, my dear, this is the biggest day in the history of Wind River!"

"Of course, Andrew," Simone McKay agreed. She couldn't resist pointing out the obvious, however. "But the town has been here less than a month, hasn't it?"

Her husband ignored the question and leaned out to peer down the railroad tracks toward the east. The double line of steel ran straight as an arrow for several miles before vanishing in a bend around a ridge that jutted up from the south. Andrew McKay followed the rails with his eyes, and as he did he could almost see the riches coming his way along with the first train.

His partner, William Durand, slapped him on the back. "Getting anxious, eh, Andrew?" boomed Durand. "History will be here soon enough, my friend. And that's what this is, you know—history. Yes, indeed, the first train to arrive in Wind River is quite a historic occasion."

The two men were a study in contrasts, McKay tall and lean, clean-shaven and somewhat austere. Durand much shorter and beefier with a closely trimmed dark beard shot through with gray. They had been partners for over a year, because that was how long it had taken to prepare for this day. Without them, the settlement of Wind River would not even exist.

The railroad station where they waited, a spanking-new building of timber and stone, was the centerpiece of the town, which spread out on both sides of the Union Pacific rails.

To the north was what Durand and McKay intended as the industrial district, with warehouses and cattle pens just waiting for use.

South of the tracks was the rest of the settlement, including the business-lined main street known as Grenville Avenue and the cross streets where residences were already springing up. The impressive homes of Durand and Andrew and Simone McKay were at opposite ends of one of those cross streets at the western edge of town, far enough away from the train station and the cattle pens so that Mr. McKay was unlikely to be offended by any less-than-pleasant odors.

Durand grimaced as the band waiting on the platform began practicing with their instruments. The musicians should have been better, he thought. They had been given their instruments only a week earlier and had not had enough time to practice. It was such small details that drove Durand mad when they weren't attended to properly. The Union Pacific deserved a proper welcome from the community when the first train arrived in Wind River.

Nothing but handcars had reached the settlement so far; in fact, the final rails had been laid on the day before. But as soon as those spikes were driven, the word had gone back up the line: the Union Pacific had a new railhead! It was cause for celebration, and that was exactly what McKay and Durand intended to provide for both the town and the railroad.

As for Simone McKay, she sighed and wished this was over so that she could go home. Summers

Wyoming, in this high, dry air, were not as hot as those in Philadelphia, but today was unusually warm and Simone missed the coolness of her parlor.

She glanced around at the crowd waiting on the platform for the train's arrival. Many of them were Union Pacific workers, given the day off so that they could witness the official moving of the railroad, but most of the citizens of Wind River were here, too.

Standing a few feet beyond Simone's husband was Judson Kent, the tall, bearded Englishman who served as the new community's doctor, and beside Kent was Michael Hatfield, the editor of the *Wind River Sentinel*. Like nearly everything else in town, the newspaper was owned by McKay and Duran, but neither one of them had any journalistic experience. The sandy-haired young Hatfield had been brought in to run the paper, and what he lacked in practical experience he had been making up for with sheer enthusiasm. At the moment he had his arm around his wife, who was holding their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and looking tired.

Simone sympathized with Delia Hatfield. Wyoming was no place to be raising a toddler, let alone to be expecting yet another child.

Someone jostled her, and Simone looked around angrily. One of the UP track layers stood there, contrite expression on his broad Irish face. "I'd be beggin' yer pardon, ma'am," he said quickly as he tugged off his battered black hat. "I didn't mean t' bump into ye."

"That's all right," Simone told him, her anger evaporating in the heat. "It's rather crowded here on the platform."

"Yes, ma'am, it's all o' that! Ever'body's ready fer th' train t' get here, I reckon. Hell on wheels, the call it!"

Simone smiled tolerantly at his exuberance. "Yes, I've heard that expression myself," she said over the bleating and blating of the nearby band. "I'm sure it's deserved."

Before the track layer could say anything else, another man shouldered him roughly aside. "Out of the way, you damned mick," the newcomer growled. He was tall and lean, wearing a stained white hat with a tightly rolled brim, a leather vest, a work shirt, and denim pants. A blond mustache drooped over his wide mouth and his hair hung long over the back of his neck. The well-worn walnut grips of his six-gun jutted up from his holster.

Simone's mouth tightened as she recognized him. His name was Deke Strawhorn, and he had been hanging around Wind River for the last week. He was a hardcase, an outlaw, some said, and he had about half a dozen men of the same stripe with him. They moved up behind him now, and the UP worker, who had started to make an angry reply to Strawhorn's gibe, saw the other men and closed his mouth. His face dark with resentment and a little shame at being run off, he moved down the platform to look for another vantage point.

Simone tried not to breathe a sigh of relief. For a moment she had been afraid that a fight would break out right there beside her.

Strawhorn glanced at her, his eyes bold and a faint smile on his mouth, and Simone looked away quickly, turning her attention back to her husband. Suddenly she saw Andrew stiffen, and he lifted his hand to point down the track to the east.

"By God, I think that's it," he said excitedly. "Yes, I'm sure of it. Here it comes!"

In spite of her normal reserve, Simone felt a surge of emotion grip her. She clutched Andrew's arm and leaned forward beside him, craning her neck so that she could see past the other people waiting anxiously on the platform.

She peered along the tracks and at first saw nothing except empty Wyoming prairie land. Then her eyes found the tiny black dot that came closer and closer as she watched, growing until she could make out the stack at the front of the locomotive with clouds of white smoke billowing up from it.

What was it the UP track layer had called it? Simone caught her bottom lip between even white

teeth as she remembered the answer.

Hell on wheels.

* * *

Cole braced himself with a hand on the side of the boxcar doorway as the train slowed to a stop. Over the hiss of the steam and the squeal of the brakes, he heard the tinny notes of what sounded like a brass band playing loudly but not particularly well. The town of Wind River was putting on some sort of fandango to welcome the train, he saw as he looked out and took note of the crowd on the platform.

Some of the UP bosses were riding in the first car behind the coal tender, and with practiced ease the engineer brought the locomotive to a stop so that it was next to the platform. Behind it stretched the rest of the train, three more passenger cars and nearly a dozen boxcars. All of them were full, too.

The previous railhead had been Laramie, some eighty miles to the east. Some of the settlement had remained intact, but all the tent saloons had been taken down and the canvas structures stored on the train, ready to be set up again here in Wind River. Along with the tents had come their owners, the saloonkeepers who knew that the Irish work gangs would gladly spend all of their wages on cheap whiskey, games of chance, and gaudily painted women. Those things the saloon owners provided in abundance.

They began pouring off the train once it had come to a full stop. The saloonkeepers, the gamblers, the soiled doves . . . banjo-plinking musicians, faro dealers, singers and dancers, swampers . . . all the men and women whose business was entertaining the laborers—and taking their money in the process. And if some of the Irishmen got robbed or even murdered along the way, well, that was just one of the risks of building a railroad through a wilderness, just like Indian attacks and rock slides and cyclones.

Cole hopped down lithely from the boxcar. It would be a little while before the ramps were put in place so that the horses stabled inside could be unloaded. Since he couldn't collect Ulysses right away, he thought he would take a look around Wind River. He might even stay a few days before riding on to scout up more buffalo. Towns weren't his favorite places, but every so often it made a nice change to eat a meal in a cafe and sleep in a bed. Made a man appreciate the rest of his life that much more.

From what Cole could see, there was more to Wind River than most of these railhead settlements. Quite a few permanent buildings had already been constructed, although there was still plenty of room along the streets for the tents that had been brought from Laramie. Some of the buildings appeared to be quite substantial, too, not just the clapboard-and-tin shanties that were sometimes thrown up behind elaborate false fronts. He saw a stone structure that was three stories tall, probably a hotel, and several other buildings along the main street had been built to last. Whoever was responsible for Wind River must have had visions of the settlement growing into another Chicago or St. Louis.

Cole paid little attention to the ceremony on the platform as he walked alongside the train. The band had stopped playing, and now somebody was making a speech. Cole glanced at him, saw a tall, dark-haired man in a fancy suit and a top hat. Standing next to him was a shorter, heavier man with a beard, also well dressed, and just behind them was a woman who caught more of Cole's attention. She wore a gown of blue silk and a feathered hat to match, and her hair was dark and thick and glossy. She was as pretty a woman as Cole had seen in a long time, but judging from her expensive outfit and the way she stood with one hand on the arm of the gent making the speech, Cole figured her for the man's wife.

He turned his eyes away from the dignitaries and started to veer around the station. From the look of things, there would be a saloon or two already open in Wind River, and a cold beer would go down nice, he decided. Just being this close to a bunch of speechifying made him thirsty.

That was when all hell broke loose.

A man yelled a curse, and a second later a woman screamed. Fists thudded against flesh as people began yelling. Cole hesitated, not sure if he wanted to turn around and look or not. This fracas was

none of his business, after all.

"Watch it, mister!"

Cole ducked instinctively and twisted around in time to see a man come flying off the platform and crash into him. The man was yelling and pinwheeling his arms and legs, but there was nothing for him to grab onto except thin air. He sailed past Cole and crashed headfirst into the ground.

Somebody had thrown the man off the platform, not caring where he landed. But Cole cared because the man had almost crashed down on top of him. He looked up and saw a couple of rough-dressed men standing at the edge of the platform, laughing raucously.

Cole felt a red haze spreading through his brain. He walked toward the platform, calling up to the two men, "Think that's mighty funny, do you?"

"Well, you sure jumped, mister," one of them replied. "Didn't really mean to throw that Irish ape on you, but I reckon it turned out a mite humorous."

Cole glanced over his shoulder. The man who had landed on the ground was still lying there motionless, out cold. There was no telling how badly he was really hurt. And the two hardcases on the platform were still laughing about it.

"Yeah," Cole grunted as he reached up without warning and grasped their shirts. "Damn, that was hilarious."

He pulled hard, and the struggling crowd behind the men gave him a hand by surging toward him. The two men plunged off the platform and sprawled in the dust on either side of Cole.

One of them rolled over and came up reaching for a gun, but by that time Cole had turned around on himself. The heel of his boot crashed into the man's jaw and sent him sprawling again, this time with a moan of pain. The other man scrambled to his feet, grated a curse, and swung a wild punch at Cole's head.

Cole pivoted in time to block the blow with an up flung left arm. With his right, he hooked a hard punch to the man's stomach as he stepped in closer. A left cross caught the man on the jaw and jerked his head around. Cole dropped him with an uppercut.

There was no time to relish victory, though, because in the next instant somebody landed on his back, staggering him. An arm looped around his throat from behind and tightened brutally, cutting off his air.

Cole drove an elbow back into the belly of his new opponent and smelled whiskey on the breath that gusted past his face in response to the blow. The arm around his neck didn't loosen, though, until Cole lashed backward with his foot and felt his boot heel dig into the man's shin. The grasp weakened then and Cole was able to twist out of it, spinning around to club a blow across the man's face.

Everything around him was chaos now. Men shouted and cursed, women screamed. From what he could see on the platform, the fight had started between some of the railroad workers and a group of hard-faced men in range clothes, but it had spread out to involve everyone in the railroad station and spill off the platform.

The musicians from the brass band were clubbing opponents over the head with trombones, which Cole thought fleetingly, was a better use for the instruments. Then one of the Irishmen from the Union was running at him, face distorted with anger, fists up and swinging.

Cole ducked aside and shouted, "Hold it, Dooley! It's me, damn it! We're on the same side!"

Dooley wasn't in any mood to listen to reason. He flailed at Cole until the buffalo hunter had no choice but to pound a couple of punches into his midsection and then knock him down with a hard overhand blow. Cole looked around, hoping no one else would jump him, especially not somebody who was supposed to be his friend.

The brawl was still going on, and Cole wondered where the law was, assuming Wind River *had* any law. The town was so new that the citizens might not have gotten around to electing a sheriff or hiring

a marshal. Some of the railroad superintendents were wading into the melee, however, swinging clubs and Cole knew it was only a matter of time before they restored order.

A gunshot cracked, a thin, wicked sound against the uproar of the crowd, and Cole heard a woman cry out, "Andrew!" His jaw tightening, he vaulted onto the platform and began trying to force his way through the mob toward the source of the shot.

That single report was the only time a gun had gone off during this chaos, but Cole had a bad feeling about it anyway. He palmed out his Colt, taking a calculated risk that more gunfire wouldn't just make things worse, and triggered off three shots into the awning that overhung the station platform. The explosions were deafening in these close quarters.

They worked, though, freezing men with fists upraised to strike. Eyes jerked around and looked toward Cole, who stood with the revolver in his hand, smoke still drifting from its barrel in thin tendrils. He heard sobbing that came from beyond several men who had been struggling to beat each other half to death only seconds earlier.

Cole shoved the men aside, not sure why he was involving himself so deeply in this. It was a question that could wait until later. Right now he wanted to know what had happened here.

Grim lines appeared on his face as he saw the man's body huddled on the platform, blood pooling on the planks beneath him. It was the tall, sleekly handsome man who had been making a speech earlier, Cole saw, but he wasn't so handsome now. One side of his face was pressed against the platform. The features that were visible were contorted in a grimace of agony. His eyes were glassy with death.

Kneeling beside him, lying half on top of him as her back heaved from the wretched sobs that shook her, was the woman Cole had seen with the dead man, the woman he had taken to be the man's wife. The thickset, bearded man was looking down at them, his face pale and stunned.

Another bearded man, this one wearing a dusty black suit and a bowler hat, held the dead man's wrist for a moment before placing it gently on the platform. "I'm quite sorry, Mrs. McKay," he said in a clipped British accent, "but I'm afraid there's not a dashed thing I can do."

The woman looked up, tears streaking her face. "Did . . . did anyone see who shot him?" she demanded. "Did anyone see who had the gun?"

A young man with sandy hair pointed suddenly at Cole. "He's got a gun!" the young man said excitedly.

Cole tensed again as every eye in the crowd swung toward him. He realized that by butting into this he might have put himself in danger. It all depended on how worked up these folks were and if they were willing to listen to reason.

He jammed the Colt back into its holster and said in a loud voice, "Yeah, I've got a gun. So do most of the men in this station. All I did was fire a couple of rounds into the roof to make everybody stop fighting."

The Englishman, who had been acting like a doctor as he checked for a pulse in the dead man's wrist, straightened to an impressive height and said, "I believe this gentleman is telling the truth. I heard the first shot distinctly, and it did not come from a gun of such a heavy caliber."

"Maybe he's got two guns," suggested one of the onlookers.

"That first shot came from a thirty-two," Cole snapped. "Maybe even a gun smaller than that. I'm not carrying anything but this forty-four, and any damn fool can see that."

The heavyset man gestured at the corpse and asked, "But who would have shot Andrew? My God, this is awful!"

"Just a stray bullet, I reckon," contributed a lean man with a blond mustache. He shrugged. "Might be bad luck."

"Keep your mouth shut, Strawhorn," the heavy-set man said angrily. "We don't need any commen-

from the likes of you."

The eyes of the man called Strawhorn narrowed, and he took a step toward the thick-waisted man. The prickling feel of impending violence was suddenly in the air again.

"Stop it!" The shrill cry came from the woman who still knelt beside her husband's body. "Stop it, all of you! Andrew's dead, and all you can do is argue!"

A young redheaded woman who was carrying a toddler thrust the child into the arms of the man who had pointed out that Cole was carrying a gun. She hurried forward and bent to put her arms around the shoulders of the distraught woman. "Come with me, Mrs. McKay," she said softly. "There's nothing you can do now. Dr. Kent will tend to things." She looked up at the tall English medic. "Won't you, Dr. Kent?"

"Of course," Kent said briskly. "Mrs. Hatfield is right. Go along with her and the other ladies, Mrs. McKay . . . Simone. I'll be 'round to see you shortly, and I'll give you something to help you sleep."

"I . . . I don't want to sleep," Simone McKay said, choking the words out. "My God, he's dead! Andrew's dead!"

Cole's mouth was a taut line as he watched the young redhead, assisted by several other women, leading the widow away from the platform and through the station to the street. He looked around and saw that the platform, packed so tightly with humanity only a short time before, was half-empty now. Many of the men involved in the brawl had bolted when the shooting started, and most of the others were beginning to drift away now. This little celebration had been blown all to hell, all right.

The doctor looked coolly at Cole and asked, "Do you mind if I inquire as to just who you are, sir?"

"Nobody," Cole said. "Just a fella who wanted to know what was going on."

The Englishman's mouth twisted in a grimace. "Well, you've seen it, haven't you?"

Cole nodded curtly. He was being dismissed, and he knew it. That was all right with him. The killing, and the brawl that had preceded it, were no concern of his.

He turned on his heel and strode to the steps at the end of the platform, descending them to circle the building and start down the street. Behind him, he could hear the sounds of the train being unloaded. By nightfall, the tents would be set up again. Whiskey would be flowing in the saloons, cards would be shuffled and dealt—sometimes fairly, sometimes not—roulette wheels would spin, and painted women would laugh gaily as they led their customers into the alcoves where the cots were set up. Business as usual, Cole thought.

And not even death could stop it.

Chapter 2

Kermit Sawyer brought his horse to a stop, hipped around in the saddle, and looked behind him. Two thousand head of Texas longhorns kicked up one hell of a lot of dust, he thought as he took off his hat and sleeve-dried sweat from his blunt, lined face. To a cattleman, those clouds of dust billowing up were a pretty sight . . . but Sawyer was just as glad that he owned those longhorns and didn't have to ride drag anymore. The air was a lot cleaner up here at the point.

He had always been the sort of hombre to be out front, Sawyer thought proudly. Hell, hadn't he been the first rancher west of the Balcones?

He stretched, old bones creaking a little as he shifted in the saddle. He was a solidly built man in his fifties, with a shock of snow-white hair above features tanned by years of the Texas sun to a shade that almost matched his saddle leather. He favored black clothes, right down to the bandanna around his neck. The only splashes of lightness about him were his hair and the specially made ivory grips on the heavy Colt he wore.

Texas was a long way behind him now. Texas, and the memories the place held. Memories of the wife who had stood by him for nigh onto thirty years, helping him fight off Comanche and drought and wideloopers, the woman who had been able to stir a cookpot with one hand and reload a rifle with the other, the mother of his children, only one of whom had survived infancy. Six months earlier he had put her in the ground, there on the hilltop overlooking the creek, right next to the four small graves. She'd wore out at last, Sawyer supposed, just an old pioneer woman gone to meet her Maker.

Her name had been Amelia, and Sawyer could whisper that name now, could remember the way she looked without feeling like somebody was stabbing a knife in his chest. But he'd had to leave Texas and come hundreds of miles up here to Wyoming Territory to escape that pain.

One of the waddies who had come with him on the trek galloped up next to him and asked, "You all right, boss? The herd's comin' up fast, and you don't want 'em trompin' right over you."

"Who the hell're you to tell me what I want?" Sawyer growled, all those memories immediately banished to the corner of his mind where he kept them. "They're my damn longhorns, and if I want 'em to sit here and let 'em walk right over me, it's my own damn business!"

The cowboy swallowed hard. "Well, sure, Mr. Sawyer, if that's what you want. . ."

Sawyer jerked a thumb at the approaching herd. "Get on back there and watch out for strays. That's what I pay you good wages for, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir!" The youngster wheeled his horse and galloped back toward the longhorns.

Sawyer faced front again, squared his shoulders, heeled the big chestnut gelding under him into a trot. He wanted to catch up to the chuck wagon and make sure young Lon had chosen a good spot to make camp.

If Soogans Malone had come along on this drive as coosie, Sawyer wouldn't have worried, but Soogans was too ancient for such a long, arduous trip. Malone was almost as old as Sawyer himself. He'd stayed behind on the home ranch, but he had promised Sawyer that his helper, Lon Rogers, could handle the chuck wagon. And the boy had jumped at the chance.

Lon wasn't much good at cowboying, but he knew his way around a campfire and a grub wagon. This was new country to him, just like it was to all of Sawyer's riders.

Each day when the old cattleman sent the chuck wagon on ahead of the herd, there was no way to know what the boy would run into. Sawyer spurred his horse to a faster gait, eager now to make sure Rogers was all right and had picked a suitable spot for night camp.

It wasn't long before the herd was out of sight, although the dust haze was still visible in the air a few miles behind Sawyer. Like West Texas, this Wyoming country was a land where a man could see for a long way. Hills rose in the distance to the right and left, and up ahead to the north, mountains

bulked on the horizon.

~~That might be the Wind River range,~~ Sawyer thought as he squinted at the far-off peaks. He had been told that the railroad was coming through this area, south of the mountains, and he knew it wouldn't be long now before he found the place where he would establish his new ranch. There was supposed to be good graze in the foothills, and with the railroad close by, it would be easy to ship his cattle to market back east. Wyoming Territory was going to be prime ranching country, and just as he had done thirty years earlier in Texas, Kermit Sawyer intended to be one of the first to take advantage of the opportunity.

He rode to the top of a ridge and reined in abruptly. Up ahead on the prairie, about a mile in front of him, he saw the chuck wagon. It had come to a stop out in the open, with no stream of any sort around it that Sawyer could see. He frowned in disapproval. Even a relative greenhorn like Lon Rogers knew that a herd had to have water. What had the boy been thinking?

Sawyer stiffened as he spotted movement around the wagon. He squinted harder until he could make out the mounted figures. A couple of them had feathered headdresses trailing down their backs. He realized, as a cold chill went down his own spine.

The chuck wagon was surrounded by Indians.

"Son of a bitch," Sawyer breathed as he reached for his saddlebags and dug out the spyglass he kept there. He pulled the glass out to its full length and lifted it to his eye.

He needed a few seconds to find what he was looking for, and then the scene came into focus. There were about a dozen Indians, he estimated.

They weren't attacking. They were just riding slowly around the wagon, looking it over curiously as if they had never seen such a thing before. Sawyer shifted the glass a little and saw Lon Rogers sitting on the wagon seat. The youngster was still alive, and Sawyer was thankful for that much. He couldn't see Lon's face, but he could tell from the stiff way the boy was sitting that he was plenty scared.

With good cause, Sawyer thought as he closed the spyglass and stowed it away in the saddlebag. Those were probably Sioux warriors, and although there was supposed to be a treaty with the Sioux, Sawyer didn't trust the savages for one minute. The Comanch' down in Texas had signed treaties, too, but they had then gone right on with their raiding and murdering.

Sawyer turned and looked back toward the herd. It would take him at least half an hour to reach his men and return to this spot with them. In that time the Sioux could get tired of examining the chuck wagon and decide to have some fun with Lon by torturing him.

Sawyer's blue eyes narrowed. Damned if he was going to stand by and let that happen. Especially not to Lon. He'd promised Lon's mother that he'd look after the boy. . . .

He spurred down the ridge, galloping toward the wagon.

The Sioux must have seen him coming. It would have been difficult not to see him in that expanse of open country. When he was still half a mile from the wagon, the warriors moved between him and the vehicle and drew their ponies into a line. They sat there waiting as Sawyer rode toward them.

He didn't rein his horse to a stop until only twenty feet separated him from the Sioux. Sawyer regarded them steadily as he leaned forward in the saddle, resting his hands on the horn. His estimation had been accurate, he saw. There were twelve of them, just as he had thought.

Beyond the Indians, Lon Rogers had twisted around on the wagon seat so that he could see what they were doing, and when he saw his employer, he exclaimed, "Mr. Sawyer! Lordy, am I glad to see you!"

"Don't be," Sawyer snapped. "What the hell were you thinking, boy, driving our chuck wagon right into the midst of a bunch of savages like this? Don't you have the sense God gave a jackrabbit?"

Lon swallowed and looked confused. "I . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Sawyer. I don't know where they came from. It was like they grew right up out of the ground. One minute they weren't there, and then they

next minute they were."

Sawyer lifted a hand and leisurely waved off the explanation without ever taking his eyes away from the Sioux. "Never mind about that. They give you any idea what they want?"

Before Lon could answer, one of the warriors spoke up. "Want whiskey," he demanded in a guttural voice. "Want baccy. More whiskey."

"I don't have any whiskey for the likes of you," Sawyer told him, ignoring the look of alarm on Lon's face. "Nor any tobacco, either. You can drink coyote piss and smoke buffalo turds for all I care."

A couple of the Sioux looked startled by his reply, including the one who had demanded whiskey and tobacco. The others probably didn't speak English, Sawyer decided.

He didn't give them time to be offended. He reached for the butt of the Winchester socketed into his saddle boot under his right thigh and pulled the rifle free. Laying it over the cantle of the saddle, he went on, "This is a Winchester Model 1866. Holds fifteen shots. That means I can kill ever' damn one of you redskins and have three bullets left over. That's what I'll have to do unless you vamoose out of here."

Several of the Indians were holding single-shot carbines. They started to lift the weapons, and the others reached for arrows in the quivers strapped to their backs. The one who had spoken before gestured curtly, however, motioning for them to wait before they killed this crazy old white man. He met Sawyer's cold stare and asked, "Who are you to talk to Sioux this way?"

"My name's Kermit Sawyer," the cattleman replied, "and I've killed a few dozen of your heathen cousins the Comanche down Texas way. I don't mind killin' a few Sioux if I have to, neither."

Vaguely, he was aware that Lon Rogers was ashen-faced and watching the confrontation with an occasional warning shake of his head. Sawyer ignored the youngster. He wasn't going to let a boy tell him how to deal with Indians.

A few seconds of tense silence went by, then Sawyer lifted one hand and pointed back where he had come from. He knew the dust from the herd would be plainly visible to these keen-eyed savages. "There's two thousand head of prime Texas beef coming up that trail," he declared. "My cattle. I've got forty proddy young cowboys driving 'em, and every one of those lads is as quick to kill a redskin as I am. But I'll tell you bucks what I'll do."

The one who spoke passable English laughed harshly. "Tell us, old man," he said.

Sawyer pretended he hadn't heard the laughter or the gibe. "I'll trade you five of those cattle to take back to your village and feed your families, in return for not having to bother with you heathens while we're passing through these parts."

"Many buffalo," the Sioux warrior said scornfully, waving a hand at the plains around them. "No need white man's skinny cattle."

Sawyer's mouth was getting a little dry, but he managed to chuckle. "Well, longhorn's not the best eatin' in the world, I'll give you that. And some of 'em in my herd are probably damned near as wild as any buffalo you got around here. So I'll throw in a couple of ponies." The horses in his remuda were what the Indians would really be after if they attacked the herd, he knew.

The warrior held up a clenched fist, opened and closed it twice. "Ten ponies," he said.

Sawyer shook his head emphatically. "Three," he countered.

"Eight ponies," the Sioux said angrily.

Sawyer worked the Winchester's lever, jacking a shell into the chamber. "Five, and that's as high as I'll go, you thievin' son of a bitch."

The warrior glared at him for a few seconds, then turned his head abruptly and spoke to the others. While the conversation was going on Sawyer stole a glance at Lon Rogers. If the boy commenced sweating any more, he'd be sitting in a puddle before long, thought Sawyer.

The spokesman looked at Sawyer again and grunted. "Five ponies and five of these longhorns. It

good."

Sawyer nodded and pointed at the chuck wagon. "And you'll leave my chuck wagon, my riders, and my herd alone?"

"You be safe on Sioux land . . . for while. Not stay long."

"We'll be out of here as soon as we can," Sawyer promised. He slid the rifle back in its sheath and swung down out of the saddle. "Lon," he called to the cook, "come get this horse and ride back to the herd. Tell Frenchy to cut five good ponies out of the remuda and bring 'em up here along with five head of stock. Make sure some of the boys come back with you." Lon hesitated, and Sawyer added, "Well, come on!"

Lon jumped down from the seat of the chuck wagon and hurried toward his boss. The line of Indians parted to let him through, and as the youngster came up to him Sawyer put his horse's reins in the boy's hands. "Don't waste any time gettin' there and back," he said quietly.

"What're you going to do, Mr. Sawyer?"

"I'll stay here with the chuck wagon and keep an eye on it. Don't want to tempt those bucks to do much."

"But . . . but what about the Sioux?"

"They won't bother me. We've made a deal. I traded with the Comanch' down in Texas, and they kept their word most of the time when it was a private deal, not a government treaty. I reckon the heathens'll do the same."

Lon licked dry lips and looked at him. "What if they don't? What if we come back and they've killed you?"

"Well, then, son . . . don't give 'em the ponies."

The boy's eyes widened, and Sawyer knew Lon thought he was crazy. That was all right. Sometimes the smartest thing a man could do was to act a little crazy.

"Go on," Sawyer urged. "Get the job done, Lon."

The cook nodded and mounted Sawyer's horse, wheeling it and kicking it into a gallop.

In less than an hour, Frenchy and half a dozen of the boys would come boiling back over that ridge, and if the Sioux hadn't kept their part of the bargain, those Texas lads would track them clear to Canada if they had to in order to even the score. Sawyer was certain of that.

He watched until Lon had disappeared over the rise, then turned and strode toward the chuck wagon. One of the Indians shifted his horse a little to get in Sawyer's way.

Sawyer just looked coldly up at the warrior until he moved the animal again. As he walked on from the wagon Sawyer thought that Amelia would have understood what he had done. A man didn't back down, didn't turn and run. He stood up to trouble when it came and met it head-on.

But that was a mite easier to do, Sawyer reckoned, when the person you loved most in the world had gone and died, leaving you behind. Life had lost some of its sweetness, some of the reason to keep on clinging to it the way most folks did.

Sawyer stepped up to the wagon seat and settled down on it to wait. The Sioux walked their horses around so that they were facing him again, and he motioned to the spokesman. "What's your name?" Sawyer asked.

"In your tongue, called Eagle Feather."

"Well, tell me, Eagle Feather, are those the Wind River Mountains?" The old cattleman pointed to the peaks rising hazily to the north.

"Wind River," Eagle Feather repeated with a nod. "Sioux land, too."

Maybe so, Sawyer mused, but if the railroad was really coming through the way people said it was, the days of the Sioux's dominion over this territory were numbered. Eagle Feather might not know that, but he was probably already a dying breed.

Sort of like Kermit Sawyer himself . . .

Chapter 3

The knock at the door of Cole's hotel room came just as he was about to go downstairs again and look for some place to get a meal. He had washed off some of the dust of the past weeks in a big wooden tub filled with hot water brought up by the clerk, then pulled a clean buckskin shirt over his head and put on a pair of denim pants. Not expecting any visitors, he reached for the coiled shell belt and holster on the bed when the knock sounded.

He slid the Colt from the holster and went over to the door, standing to one side out of habit as he called, "Who is it?"

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Tyler," replied a voice that was vaguely familiar. "My name is William Durand."

Cole didn't know any William Durand and was about to say so when the man went on, "It's very important, and it could prove to be profitable for you, Mr. Tyler."

Cole had never been one to object to an honest profit, but he wasn't greedy enough to let the promise of a payoff make him careless, either. He twisted the key in the lock and stepped back quickly, keeping the revolver trained on the doorway. "It's open," he called. "Come on in."

The knob turned and the door swung slowly open. The man standing there blinked in surprise at the sight of the gun pointed at him and said, "Oh, dear." Cole recognized him as the thickset, bearded individual who had been on the platform that afternoon with Andrew McKay.

William Durand wasn't alone, either. Cole saw the British doctor standing beside him, and the sandy-haired young man from the platform— what was his name? Hatfield?—was also with him. The doctor stepped into the room first, casting a scornful glance at the gun, and said to Cole, "You don't need that, my good man. We're here on business."

Cole smiled thinly. "Out here on the frontier, some folks do business with a gun in their hand."

"Yes, but you're not a desperado, and neither are we."

Cole inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment of the point, then slipped his thumb off the hammer of the Colt and slid the revolver back into the holster. He buckled the shell belt around his waist, however, and thonged down the holster.

"I don't know what brought you here, gents," he said, "but I'm hungry, so get on with it."

The heavysset man stepped forward, obviously more at ease now that Cole had put up his gun.

The man extended a hand and said, "I'm William Durand. I was Andrew McKay's business partner." Cole looked at his hand but didn't take it, said, "I figured as much."

Durand dropped the hand, not seeming to be offended. "This is Dr. Judson Kent."

"Pleased to meet you," the medico said dryly.

"And Michael Hatfield, the editor of the *Wind River Sentinel*," Durand continued. "We're here as a sort of unofficial town council, as it were."

"I'm honored, I reckon," Cole said. "But what the hell do you want with me?"

"You *are* Cole Tyler? That's how you signed the register downstairs."

Cole felt a brief surge of irritation that they had checked the register. "That's right," he said.

"You are presently employed as a buffalo hunter, providing fresh meat for the workers of the Union Pacific?"

Cole nodded but didn't say anything.

Michael Hatfield spoke up, saying eagerly, "You rode with Colonel Jeb Stuart during the Civil War, didn't you?"

"What if I did?" Cole asked.

"But even though you were a Confederate, you signed up as a scout for the army after the war."

Cole shrugged. "The war was over. I didn't see any need to keep on fighting it."

"And you have also guided several wagon trains to Oregon, is that correct?" Kent asked.

Cole looked at the Englishman and said, "~~You gents have been studying up on me. Why?~~"

"We're told that you are an honest man and a tough man," Durand stated. "We need someone like that, Mr. Tyler."

"What for?"

"To be the marshal of Wind River."

Cole just stared at them for a long moment, his gaze going from Durand to Kent to Hatfield and back to Durand. He opened his mouth, hesitated again, then finally said, "What the hell are you talking about? Are you asking *me* to be your marshal?"

"That is precisely what we are doing," Kent said in his clipped tones.

Cole looked over at the young newspaper editor. "Hell, this afternoon you practically accused me of killing that fella McKay!"

Hatfield flushed slightly and looked uncomfortable. "I didn't say that. I just said you had a gun. And I know now I overreacted."

"A mite," Cole agreed wryly. "I thought for a second I was going to wind up being lynched. McKay seemed to be a mighty important man."

"He and I built this town, Mr. Tyler," Durand said. "Now Andrew is gone, and we must carry on without him. We must put a stop to lawless displays like the one that took his life, and to do that, we need law and order!"

Cole rubbed his freshly shaven jaw. "Still don't see why you came to me."

"We think you're the best man for the job," Hatfield said. "We've had a constable, but he hasn't been able to maintain order. We need a real marshal."

"I've never carried a badge in my life."

"No reason why you can't start now, eh?" Kent put in.

Cole shook his head curtly. "Sorry. I'm riding out in a day or two to get back to buffalo hunting. I just took a few days off while they moved the railhead."

"We'll pay you more than you make shooting buffalo," Durand said.

"It's not a question of money. I'm not a lawman." Cole stepped past them, went to the door, and put his hand on the knob. "Good night, gentlemen."

Judson Kent faced him. "Are you certain we can't convince you otherwise?"

"There's bound to be plenty of men around here who are handy with their fists and handy with a gun," Cole told them. "Hire one of them." He opened the door.

Durand sighed heavily. "We're very disappointed, Mr. Tyler."

"Well, that's not my problem, is it?" Cole crossed his arms and leaned against the wall beside the door until they had filed out, then closed the door with his foot. He sighed and shook his head. Of all the crazy things . . .

The hotel didn't have a dining room, but there was a hash house down the block. Cole ate his fill, then stood in the street for a moment and listened to the laughter and music coming from the ten saloons clustered at the other end of the avenue.

He'd had a drink earlier, before getting Ulysses settled for the night in a nearby stable, and while he was still a little thirsty, he decided against visiting any of the saloons. The mood in the settlement was still tense. If any fights broke out, he wanted no part of them. He turned toward the hotel instead.

The clerk wasn't behind the desk as Cole crossed the lobby. It was almost like being in a hotel back in Kansas City or St. Louis. There was a rug on the floor and a couple of plants in pots, curtains over the windows, and armchairs and settees scattered around the room. *Mighty fancy for Wyoming Territory*, Cole thought. But it was obvious from everything he had seen that Durand and McKay intended the best for their town.

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