

Owen Buchanan and his brother seek gold in infamous, wicked, boomtown Deadwood in July 1876. But mining the miners is better than mining gold directly. They start the primitive Hotel Deadwood, the cheapest hotel in town. But they clash with the notorious Stark brothers, which leads to deadly violence.

Hotel Deadwood

by James A. Janke

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HOTEL DEADWOOD

Don't mine for the gold; mine the miners instead!

JAMES A. JANKE

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-754-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

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By
James A. Janke

Chapter 1

Thursday, July 13, 1876

Owen Buchanan and the three other young men with him strode briskly across the hot, empty Dakota prairie. Owen carried his Winchester casually in his right hand, and his companions were equally nonchalant about their own carbines.

Owen had a slight grin on his face. That was partly because his younger brother Philo was telling another of his bawdy jokes. But mostly it was because he was just enjoying himself so much. And he knew that the others—Philo, their cousin Willis Buchanan, and their neighbor Lucas Miller—were also feeling that same exuberance.

The tall, crisp, yellowed grass whipped at their pant legs, and the baked sod crunched beneath their boots. The strong, dry prairie wind flapped the brims of their hats pulled low against the glare and pressure of the mid-afternoon sun. Their shirts stuck to their backs because of their sweat. Yet the men weren't especially uncomfortable; they were used to hard work back home.

Philo said, "And then one boy says to the other one, 'Christ, I'm glad we didn't have the whole two dollars.'"

All four men laughed, including Philo.

Owen said, "Anybody see where those antelope went?"

Willis said, "I think supper skedaddled when they saw us comin'."

Two quick, faint pops sounded in the distance ahead of them.

Owen slowed a bit and cocked his head to one side, not sure of what he had heard.

But Lucas stopped short. He snapped his carbine up across his chest with both hands and darted nervous glances to both sides. "Did you hear that?"

Philo kept walking, oblivious. "Okay, here's another one," he said, and he launched into another raunchy story from his endless repertoire.

Owen finally stopped about ten feet in front of Lucas.

Willis stopped when Owen stopped. He always tended to follow Owen's lead, considering Philo a bit reckless and Lucas too cautious.

Owen cocked his head to the other side. He looked back at Lucas. Tentatively he said, "Sounded like—"

"Gunfire," Lucas said, finishing Owen's sentence for him.

Owen nodded. "That's what I thought." He was still rather casual about it.

Philo looked back. He stopped and turned around and faced the others. "Hey, don't you want to hear this one?"

Lucas, impatient, said to him, "Didn't you hear that, Philo? That was gunfire."

"So?" Philo said. He glanced around at the flat, yellow-tan, treeless landscape.

Lucas said, "Well, it didn't come from the bull train."

All four men glanced back at the thin gray and brown streak of oxen, wagons, and men in the plodding bull train. The train stretched out along the horizon almost a mile south of them. Almost all the men in the bull train were also walking; only the wagonmaster rode a horse. And no one rode on a wagon.

Owen agreed. "No, it didn't." He looked forward again. His Winchester still dangled at his side.

Philo gave the surroundings a quick perusal. "I don't see nothin' but hills and dried grass," he said. He snorted and planted a fist on one hip. "And the hills ain't hardly hills. Back in Illinois we wouldn't call these puny rises hills like the bullwhackers do."

Lucas said. "But, Philo, who's shootin'?" He answered his own question in almost an awed whisper. "It could be Sioux." He gripped his Winchester more tightly.

"Easy, Lucas," Owen said. "Those shots were a long way off." He rested the butt of his Winchester against his hip, took off his hat with his left hand, and wiped the sweat from his brow with the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt. He started fanning his face with his hat, looking around, pondering. He shrugged. "It could be anybody, Lucas."

Lucas quickly stepped up next to Owen and Willis. "We'd be sittin' ducks out here afoot. They told us Sioux always go mounted. Expert horsemen we were told."

"Yeah, I know," Owen said. But he sounded skeptical.

Philo sauntered back to them. "Aw, we haven't seen a single Indian since we left Fort Pierre on the Missouri. And we're just a day or two shy of Deadwood now. Even Lyman Ritter don't think there are any Sioux around here. And he's wagonmaster, so he oughta know."

Owen said, "That's a good point, Philo."

Philo said, "If we were gonna be hit by Sioux, it would've happened by now."

Owen said, "Another good point."

Lucas said, "You two and Ritter are just guessin'. Who else but Sioux would be way out here off the trail? You wanna answer me that?"

Philo laughed. "We're way off the trail ourselves, Lucas."

Willis finally said something. "Maybe it's somebody else out huntin' for supper just like us. Maybe they saw the same antelope we saw from the bull train." He looked around, squinting. He hadn't brought his carbine up.

Lucas said, "We're the only ones who've left our train. And we haven't seen any other trains goin' in either direction. Not for a long time at least."

Owen nodded slowly. "That's true," he said. He put his hat back on. "But there could be another bull train just a few miles ahead of us and we wouldn't see it."

"Well, they wouldn't be huntin' this far *back* of their own train, would they?" Lucas said.

Owen shrugged. "Wouldn't be much of a task to catch up to it again."

"Damn slow oxen," Philo muttered. "Not only dumb but slower than a man can walk. Backwards."

"Yeah," Willis said. "Give me a team of horses any day."

Lucas said, "Ritter warned us not to go off by ourselves like this. Huntin' out on the open prairie."

"Well," Philo said with a grin, "he's quick enough to share in any fresh meat we come up with. Him and all his bullwhackers."

Owen looked at Lucas. "You didn't pay any attention to Ritter's warnings before."

Lucas said. "It's different now. I didn't hear gunfire before. I say we go back. Right now."

Philo lifted his carbine over his head with both hands, stretched, and then laid the weapon across the nape of his neck and rested his hands idly over the butt and barrel of the weapon. "Well, far as I'm concerned, I hope it *is* Sioux."

Lucas said, "That's stupid."

Philo smiled. "We came out here for some adventure, didn't we, Lucas?"

"I came out here for some gold," Lucas said. "I don't want nothin' to do with any Sioux."

Philo said, "Well, I'd love to have a fight with some Indians. Really see the elephant. Wouldn't that be somethin' to tell the gals back home in the fall?" He grinned at the other three young men and lowered his carbine. "Damn, we'd have 'em hangin' on every word."

Owen grinned. He could indeed picture that.

Willis said to Philo, "Course, you're assumin' we'd win in any fight with the Sioux." He had a smirk on his face.

Owen chuckled. "Willis, too, has got a good point, Philo. Men do get killed by Indians out here, you know."

Philo snorted. "Not us. We're armed to the teeth."

Lucas said, "What if there's a hundred of 'em?"

Philo said, "Oh, for crissakes, Lucas."

There were three more distant shots.

"Not much more than a ripple on the wind," Owen said.

Lucas said. "Well, I say that's enough. To hell with the antelope. Beans'll be fine with me again tonight. And I don't care about seein' no damn elephant either, Philo. Let's go back."

Willis said, "Doesn't sound like one gun. Shots comin' too fast."

Owen nodded. "And sounds more like a pistol and a rifle answering each other rather than two rifles."

"Hot damn, a fight for sure," Philo said excitedly. He waved an arm forward. "Come on. Let's go see what the shootin's about. Let's find us

some Sioux.” He took a few steps forward but stopped when no one followed him. “Come on, fellas, dammit.”

Lucas said, “Owen, you’re not gonna be bullheaded like your brother, are you? I can’t believe you’re eager for a fight with Indians.”

“No, I’m not,” Owen said. “The Sioux have a fierce reputation.”

“But maybe somebody’s in trouble,” Philo said.

“Who?” Lucas asked. “Who would be fool enough to be way out here?”

Philo smiled. “I told you before. *We’re* out here. Someone else could be out here too.” He spread his arms as if to end the argument.

Owen said. “If those are Sioux shooting, who are they shooting at, Lucas?”

Lucas said, “Maybe it’s just some Indians shootin’ at other Indians and none of our business.”

“Aw, come on, Lucas,” Philo scoffed. “You don’t really think that.”

Willis rested his Winchester in the crook of his arm. He said, “Ain’t no other Indians out here but Sioux. And they wouldn’t be shootin’ at each other. Philo could be right. Maybe someone’s bein’ attacked by Indians.”

Lucas said, “And what if there’s a hundred Indians out there? Like I said before.”

Willis squinted. “Sounds like just a few.”

Philo said, “Besides, the more Indians there are, the easier it’ll be to hit one of ‘em.” He grinned widely and raised an eyebrow toward Lucas.

But Owen scowled at Philo. “Ma and Pa wouldn’t like to hear you talk like that, Philo. Killing people so easily.”

“But it’s just Indians, Owen,” Philo said. “Murderin’ Indians.”

“Even so,” Owen said. “Indians are still people.”

Philo smirked but said nothing in response. Then he shrugged.

Lucas stared back at the bull train ponderously inching its way along the horizon. “Well, enough of this damn jabberin’. Let’s get the hell back to the train.”

Philo put up a hand. “Wait a minute, Lucas. Consider the situation.” The other three men looked at him. “Now, each of us has a new Winchester.” He held up his carbine. Then he patted the butt of a pistol

stuck in his waistband. "And a new Colt tucked in our pants. And both are chambered for the same .44 rounds our pockets are bulgin' with. We're not exactly helpless out here."

Owen agreed. "Four of us armed like this should give any Indians pause."

Lucas said, "If there's only a few of 'em."

Willis said, "Could just be one Indian and one white man in a standoff."

Philo nodded eagerly. "Maybe one white man who'd be mighty happy to see four more show up right about now." He beckoned with an arm and started forward once more. "Come on, let's go."

Owen held up a hand. "Wait a second, Philo. Let's not go off half-cocked."

Lucas said, "Philo, you damn fool, think of all the times Owen's had to come to your rescue."

Philo kicked at the dirt in disgust. "Yeah, I suppose. Aw, hell, you think too much, Owen."

Lucas looked back. "If we go any farther, we'll be out of sight of the train. We might not be able to find our way back to it."

Philo snorted. "Hell, the trail's almost half a mile wide. There's more bull trains goin' to the Black Hills right now this instant than I've seen in my whole life. Those bull trains have left a trail no one could miss."

Lucas said, "Well, at least let's go back to the bull train and get some help. There must be forty bullwhackers and Black Hillers back there."

Philo said, "We could be too late by then. And what makes you think Ritter will halt the train for this anyway? Those bullwhackers don't like to delay for anythin'. Why, he'll just say we're imaginin' things. Or that it's just none of our business."

Owen understood Lucas's struggle. He knew Lucas wasn't a coward, and the man wasn't irresponsible either. And he was right to be wary of falling in with too many Sioux. Or even with a few. This wouldn't be some friendly fist fight at the town's Fourth of July picnic.

Willis said, "Well, what about it, Owen?"

Owen thought for a moment more and then said, "Philo's right. Someone may need our help. So let's go far enough to figure out the situation and then decide what to do."

Philo grinned. "All right!"

"But slowly, Philo," Owen said. "Let's not run smack into something we can't handle."

Philo scoffed once more. "You heard 'em back at Fort Pierre say a body of armed men didn't really have to worry about Indians."

Lucas said, "But back in Fort Pierre they meant 20 or 30 men. Not just four."

In punctuation, another distant shot drifted back on the wind.

"Just one that time," Willis said. He looked at Owen. "Wonder what that means."

Philo said, "Maybe means we're already too late." He spit on the ground disgustedly.

Lucas looked at Owen. "You wouldn't leave my body out here, would you, Owen? You'd take it back to the train so it could get a decent Christian burial, wouldn't you?"

Philo muttered, "You're not gonna need a funeral, Lucas. For crissakes."

Owen said, "We'll be cautious, Lucas. I don't hanker for a funeral of my own either."

Owen idly adjusted the pistol stuck in the waistband of his trousers. It was uncomfortable carrying the pistol that way. His suspenders didn't keep the pants tight enough to grip the heavy pistol firmly. Snugging up the buckle on the back of his pants had helped some, but it was still awkward. They had joked about the pistols falling into their pants. Maybe he really should have spent the extra money back in Fort Pierre for a holster. None of them had. They just left the pistols on the wagons except when they went hunting.

"Where's your mind off to, Owen?" Philo asked. "Get back here."

Owen grinned. Philo could read him pretty well sometimes.

"Well," Owen drawled. The closer he got to the actual act the less sure he was about the idea.

"Owen," Philo said in exasperation, "if we're gonna move, let's move."

Lucas sighed. "I always said you Buchanans would be the death of me someday. But I was jokin' before. Now I ain't."

Philo laughed. He clapped Lucas on the shoulder. "At least we'll all go to hell together." He looked at the others, smiling broadly.

Owen smiled back weakly, and Willis said, "I'm sure you'll be the first one through the door even there, Philo."

Philo laughed at that. He started off. "Let's go!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, dammit," Lucas protested. "I want Owen leadin', not you."

Willis agreed. "Owen leads, Philo."

Philo stopped and shrugged good-naturedly. "Okay." He bowed slightly and gestured forward with a sweep of his hand. "Big brother, lead the way. We, your sheep, shall follow."

Owen raised his Winchester across his chest with both hands. He felt his scalp cringe. Were they really about to take on the much-vaunted Sioux, the scourge of the plains? Why, he'd never fired a shot at another man in his whole life. Nor had any man taken a shot at him. Was Lucas right? But Owen took a deep breath and started forward.

"Okay," he said. "We go slow. I want to know how many there are before we step into a fight. We'll keep to the low ground between the hills."

"We can see farther from the rises," Philo pointed out, as they all fell into step next to Owen.

"But they can also see us better that way, too," Owen said.

Philo grunted in response.

Owen scanned the land all around as they proceeded slowly, the other three men falling in line abreast behind him. All he saw was the gentle rise and fall of the endless sea of tall, withered grass beneath a brilliant blue sky with some puffy white clouds.

He kept to the valleys between the rises. Usually the rises weren't tall enough that he couldn't still see over them anyway, but sometimes a hill entirely blocked his view in a particular direction.

A single shot popped in the distance.

"Still there," Philo said. He sounded relieved. "And a lot closer, I think." He took a little skip in his step.

"Don't be so cheerful," Lucas said.

“Let’s cut the chatter,” Owen said. “No noise.”

Owen had set off in the general direction from which he thought the shots were coming, but he knew the wind played tricks with sounds on the prairie. They had learned that fact early on their hike toward the Black Hills from the Missouri River. The constant wind blew dust and grass and tumbleweeds—and sounds. Sometimes you could hear the creak of a wagon a mile upwind and not be able to hear two men talking ten yards downwind.

Suddenly he stopped short.

Lucas gasped, “What is it, Owen?”

Owen looked down at some bent and broken blades of yellow grass, the slight depressions in the hard, parched sod made by the iron tires of wagon wheels, and a few hoofprints. “Wagon tracks,” he said.

The other three looked down. Willis said, “Looks like just one wagon. And those prints were made by horses, not oxen.” Shoes for horses were complete semicircles, but oxen were cloven-hoofed. Their shoes were split.

Owen looked up the trail of tracks. “They went that way.” It seemed silly to say the obvious, but it gave him time to think.

“Hot damn,” Philo said. “This is it. We just follow those tracks right to the Indians.”

But Owen shook his head. “If the Indians are attacking the wagon, then we’d wind up being attacked, too, as soon as we overtook the wagon.”

“But—”

“We’ll move parallel to the tracks,” Owen said.

Lucas said to Philo. “That’s why I wanted your brother to lead, stupid. He’ll keep us alive longer than you would.”

Willis nodded at that. “Yeah.”

Philo shrugged. “Okay.”

Owen said, “Let’s go. We may be very close. Keep your Winchesters ready.”

Lucas snorted. “No kiddin’.”

Owen went even more slowly now. He skirted some rises and bent down slightly when the rise was only a few feet high. He felt a little silly

doing so because anyone looking in their direction would have seen them anyway. But it seemed like the natural thing to do.

Two more shots were fired from up ahead. These shots were not pops; they were sharp reports of a gun being fired. Owen stopped. "Those were close."

"Sweet Jesus," Lucas muttered.

"I don't see any Indians," Willis said. He was shielding his eyes from the sun with a hand. "Or a wagon."

Owen shook his head slowly. "Me neither." He surveyed the landscape ahead of him. Low hills, yellow grass, a clear horizon against the blue sky. He thought he could probably see several miles into the distance. But he saw no Sioux, no white men, no wagon. Yet, both could be in the very next depression, right over the next rise. It was exasperating. This was strange country. "We'll angle off to the right. Try to come in from a side." He waved a hand forward slowly. "Let's go."

He angled off to his right. The other three followed. Philo and Willis were abreast of each other and Lucas a few steps behind them.

They had gone another hundred yards when they heard another shot, but this one was off to the side. They jerked their heads to the left and froze.

Willis whispered, "Owen, we went right past 'em."

Owen nodded rapidly. His pulse quickened.

Philo gripped his carbine more tightly, eagerly. "Here comes the elephant," he whispered.

"Damn your elephant," Lucas snapped.

"Shut up, both of you," Owen said. Then he motioned forward. "Real slow now. Keep your heads down."

The other three nodded quickly and they set out again.

Now Owen carefully and slowly put one foot in front of the other. He was conscious of even the slightest sound his boots made on the crunchy grass. He even thought he could hear his own rapid breathing over the sound of the wind whipping at his hat. His heart rate leaped. And he knew that all the sweat drenching his body was no longer just from the heat of the day.

This time he took a straight line directly up a rise toward the sound of the shooting. He crouched lower as he went higher up the hill. As he neared the crest he dropped to his stomach, whipped his hat off, and then crawled slowly the rest of the way. Finally he could just see over the top through the dried grass that whispered and rustled there. Immediately he sucked in his breath and ducked down. He slid backwards a few feet.

Philo scampered close but didn't go to the crest. "See 'em?"

Owen nodded vigorously. Now his heart was pounding. He swallowed hard.

Lucas and Willis joined them. Lucas whispered, "How many?"

"Two," Owen told him.

Philo repeated, also in a whisper, "Two? Just two?" He grinned at Lucas. "What'd I tell ya, Lucas. Easy pickin's."

Lucas let out an audible sigh. "Thank God."

Willis said quietly, "We can handle two, Owen." He was nodding vigorously. The relief in his face was obvious. He seemed almost ready to laugh.

Owen smiled at Willis. "Okay, so we're all relieved." Willis grinned back at him.

Lucas added, "Did you see a wagon? Are they shootin' at white men?"

Owen nodded. He said, "It's sitting in the middle of the little valley between these low hills. Pretty close. A four-horse team. The horses are still hitched in place."

Willis said, "In this sun? They must be miserable."

Lucas said, "Jesus, Willis, you care more about horses than you do about the guy in the wagon."

Willis shrugged. "Maybe so. People hurt you; horses don't."

Philo said, "What's a wagon doin' way out here off the trail anyway?"

Owen said, "Looks like there is something wrong with a front wheel. It's lying on the ground. I saw some tools and the grease bucket near the front axle."

Philo fidgeted and grinned broadly. "Let's all go take a look."

Lucas turned sharply toward him. "We don't need to look. Owen did our lookin' for us."

Owen said, "Well, you'd all better take a quick look. So you can understand any plan we make. Fellas, this is deadly serious. There are two bodies lying next to the wagon and another farther away."

Lucas said, "Oh, Sweet Jesus."

Philo said, "Damn Indians."

Willis grimaced.

"Hats off," Owen hissed. "And nothing above a whisper." The other three men snatched their hats from their heads. "Let's go. On elbows. Slither forward."

They crawled forward, Winchesters sliding along the ground in front of them. They all stopped with just their eyes and the tops of their heads showing over the rise. Owen thought the yellowed grass waving in the breeze on the crest of hill made for pretty good concealment.

Philo whispered loudly, "Sioux! I can't believe it. It's really Sioux."

On the next low rise in front of them two Sioux warriors lay prone with the barrels of their rifles resting on the crest of the hill. Neither Indian looked like he was about to take a shot. They were simply peering at the wagon.

"Wait 'til I talk to the gals back home," Philo declared.

"Sh," Owen cautioned.

Willis gestured toward the side. "There's their ponies, ground hitched." Two Indian ponies stood patiently to the rear and to the side. The ponies' tails brushed lazily at flies pestering their rumps. He said, "Wonder how long those horses have been standin' there like that. They're lookin' pretty hangdog."

The rise the Indians were on was lower than the rise from which they were being watched by the four white men. Owen and the others could easily see over the warriors to the basin in which the wagon stood.

The wagon was canvas-covered, and the canvas was drawn tightly shut so nothing could be seen of the interior of the wagon.

Owen said, "The fellow inside the wagon must be wrung dry himself. With the canvas closed up like that, it's got to be an oven inside that wagon."

"I see the two men sprawled on the ground next to the wagon," Lucas said. "Those are white men."

"They look dead," Owen said somberly. "The Indians must've jumped them before they could unhitch the horses."

"Poor bastards," Lucas said.

"Murderin' Indians," Philo muttered.

Willis said, "But that third man off to the side is an Indian."

"Good," Philo said.

Lucas said. "Look at that Winchester leanin' against the off rear wheel."

They all followed his instruction. A carbine was propped up against a wagon wheel.

Philo said, "I'll bet that fellow in the wagon wishes he had that long gun inside the wagon instead of outside."

"Probably why we're hearing just a pistol," Owen said. "Those two Indians in front of us both have carbines, so it must be the man in the wagon using a pistol."

"Look at them saucy bastards," Philo said. "Like they were watchin' fish in a pond on a lazy Sunday afternoon."

The four white men fell silent for a moment as they studied the two Indians in front of them.

The Indian on the left was wearing an Army jacket with corporal's stripes on it and a soldier's hat. The other was bare-chested and wore nothing on his head. Both men wore loincloths. The Indian with the jacket wore moccasins but the other one was barefoot.

Owen whispered, "They look more comfortable dressed like that than I feel right now."

Philo said, "I'll bet the one on the left killed a soldier to get a coat and hat like that."

Owen had to nod at that. It seemed likely.

Philo added, "The murderin' son-of-a-bitch."

Lucas said, "Sweet Jesus."

"Well, Owen," Philo said. "Which one do you want?" He started sliding his carbine forward.

"Me?" Owen asked.

"Yeah, you," Philo said, exasperated.

“Makes sense, Owen,” Willis said. “You’re probably the best shot in the township.”

“Doesn’t matter how good a shot you are,” Philo said. “We can’t miss at this range. But you’re in charge, Owen, so you get first pick.”

Owen drawled, “Well. . .” He was about to kill a man, to take a man’s life. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, Indian or not, deserved or not.

Philo glanced at him. “Christ, Owen, don’t think about this so long. Just pick one. Right or left?”

Owen said, “I never actually shot a man before, Philo. You know that.”

Philo said, “Yeah, I know that. Neither have I. So here’s your chance.”

Owen said, “That’s not what I meant.”

Philo frowned. “What are you sayin’, Owen? Don’t you wanna shoot one of ‘em? Don’t you think you *need* to?”

Owen said, “Philo, this isn’t like shooting ducks over a pond in the fall back in Illinois.”

“It’s easier,” Philo said. “The ducks were flyin’. These Indians are just lyin’ there.”

“I meant these are men, not ducks.”

Philo scoffed. “They’re murderers, Owen. Cold-blooded killers. You can see the two dead white men lyin’ there.”

“Yeah, Owen,” Willis said.

“So you expect me to just shoot one of them in the back?” Owen said.

Philo snorted. “You want I should ask ‘em to turn around?”

Willis whispered to Philo, “Well, it does seem kind o’ low to shoot ‘em when they’re just lyin’ there unsuspectin’ like that.”

Lucas blustered, “Are you Buchanans crazy? If we’re not gonna shoot ‘em, what’d we come out here for?”

Owen paused. “We got the drop on them. Maybe we should just ask them to surrender.”

Philo guffawed. “In what language?”

Owen smiled sheepishly. “You got a point there.”

“Stop thinkin’ so much, Owen,” Philo said. “God dammit.”

Willis said, "If you try to speak to 'em first, Owen, they'll probably just shoot you dead. I would if I were them."

Owen nodded. "Yeah, you make sense." He stared at the two warriors on the hill in front of them, both men oblivious to the imminent and deadly danger behind them.

Just then a puff of smoke issued from the rear of the wagon and they heard the report instantly. A spurt of dust erupted short of the crest of the rise in front of them.

"Pistol," Owen said.

"Wonder why the fellow even bothers shootin'," Philo said. "He can't hit 'em."

Owen said, "Maybe just wants the Indians to know he's still there."

"He's scared," Lucas said. "Just like I'm scared. No, he's more scared."

One of the two Sioux warriors inched forward and casually took hold of his carbine and snapped an equally casual shot at the wagon. The bullet chunked into the wooden side of the wagon. The Indian levered another cartridge into the chamber of his carbine and laid it back down. He slid back below the crest of the hill.

Willis said, "The Indians don't seem in any hurry to press an attack."

The bare-chested Sioux turned his head to the other one and said something. They both laughed.

Owen said, "Huh. Somehow I never think of Indians as laughing at anything."

"Damn 'em," Philo said. "Makin' light of killin' white men like that." He looked at Owen. "Well?"

Owen said, "It seems—unfair to shoot a man when he's laughing."

"Aw, for crissakes, Owen," Philo said. He rolled his eyes. Lucas and Willis both looked at Owen, concerned by Owen's hesitancy.

The bare-chested Indian rolled over on his back and propped himself up on his elbows. He said something to his companion, and he laughed again, tapping his big toes together. The other Indian laughed too and said something in return. They both laughed again.

Owen looked at the face of the Sioux warrior facing him. It was a broad face with a big, flat nose, black eyes, dark ruddy complexion, a

wide grin. "Geez," Owen said. "First wild Indian I ever saw face to face. Wonder what he's grinning about. What do Indians joke about, you suppose?"

"Owen," Philo said.

The Indian casually glanced upward. His grin vanished, his mouth dropped open, he gasped, and his whole body flinched.

Lucas hissed, "He sees us."

The Sioux warrior yelped, grabbed his carbine, and rolled to his left. The other warrior instantly rolled in the other direction without looking up, snatching up his own weapon as he went. They both leaped to their feet and fired their carbines from the hip. Each man screamed as loud as he could.

Owen gasped as a bullet zipped past his ear close enough for him to hear the angry hum. "Damn!" Adrenaline surged through his body.

"Sweet Jesus," Lucas exclaimed as he ducked. "They're tryin' to kill us!"

Philo laughed at him.

Owen's scalp cringed at the screaming and the shooting; his heart leaped. Another bullet kicked up dirt in front of him. He sucked in his breath.

Philo yelled, "Owen!"

Without thinking further Owen yelled, "All right, get 'em!" He rose to his knees, raised his Winchester and fired a quick shot. He missed.

The other three men rose to their knees and fired too. They all missed.

The two Indians fired again and again, working the levers of their carbines as they ran sideways toward their ponies, yelling and screeching.

"Don't let 'em get away," Philo shouted. "Shoot 'em, shoot 'em!"

Owen levered a new cartridge into his Winchester's chamber. He scrambled to his feet and fired another shot. "Keep 'em from the ponies!"

Willis shouted, "Don't hit the horses!"

The other three men leaped to their feet too with only a brief pause in the fire.

Lever and fire, lever and fire. Empty casings sounded like metallic rain on the hard ground. The sound of the gunfire was one long deafening crash. Bullets kicked up dirt all around the two Sioux and their ponies.

The Indians grabbed the rope halters of their ponies, which were prancing about, frightened by all the sudden gunfire. The warriors leaped onto the mounts. They kicked them hard and drove them straight up and over the rise in front of them. They disappeared from the view.

The four young men stopped firing. They were all breathing hard, their hearts pounding. Willis waved a hand casually at the cloud of gunsmoke swirling around them. "Whew."

Owen said, "All that shooting and every shot missed."

Philo said, "We didn't hit a damned thing."

Willis said, "I can't believe we didn't even hit the horses."

Lucas said, "But they didn't hit us either." He was smiling, looking down at his clothes and checking for bullet holes. "I'm not gonna die."

Owen said, "Back at Fort Pierre they said the Sioux were poor shots because they never had any ammunition to practice with. But we've had practice."

Philo laughed. "Well, no matter. I saw the elephant." He looked at the others and grinned as wide as he could. "I saw the elephant, gents! I had a fight with Sioux Indians!"

Lucas said, "You and your God damned elephant."

Owen realized his whole body was trembling. He held out a quivering right hand and turned it over slowly. "I'm shaking like a leaf," he said. "No wonder I didn't hit anything."

Willis said, "I'm glad we didn't hit the horses."

Lucas said, "My hands were shakin' so hard, I couldn't aim. I don't know what I was thinkin' standin' up like that in plain view."

Owen said, "I never had a man shoot at me before."

Philo said, "Damned excitin', wasn't it, Owen?" It wasn't really a question; it was a statement.

Willis thrust out a pointed finger. "Look! There they are again, toppin' that rise yonder."

They all looked, but Philo snapped his carbine up to his cheek and took aim. "I might still kill me a Sioux!"

The other three men started to bring up their Winchesters, but Owen hesitated. He said, "Maybe we should just let them go."

Philo squinted down the barrel of his carbine. He said, "Here goes one for the gals back home."

Another mounted Indian followed the first two.

"What the hell?" Philo blurted. The barrel of his carbine dipped as he lowered it slightly and straightened up his cocked head.

Then two more Indians charged their ponies up the hill. And then another one after them.

"Sweet Jesus," Lucas said. "There's six of 'em."

Owen's ears twitched. "Holy shit," he said softly.

"Sweet Jesus," Lucas repeated.

Willis grabbed Owen's arm so hard it hurt.

Owen grimaced and snapped a look at Willis. "Hey—"

Willis pointed in the opposite direction with the barrel of his Winchester. "Over there," he said.

The other three men followed Willis's pointing. Around the side of one hill three more mounted Sioux were kicking their ponies hard and racing away. And over the top of the hill went another four.

Lucas said, "Sweet Jesus. That's—that's thirteen Indians."

"Ho-ly she-it," Owen said softly. "Look at 'em all."

Willis said, "Fellas, if just one of 'em turns around and takes a really close look and sees there's only the four of us farm boys from Illinois, we're fucked."

Lucas said, "Sweet Jesus."

Owen glared at Philo. He wanted to damn Philo for goading them into a disaster.

But his brother stood frozen with his mouth hanging open, his eyes bulging. He said nothing. His face looked like all the blood in his body had suddenly sunk to his feet.

All the Indians disappeared.

Lucas said, "Sweet Jesus. They never looked back. Just ran like hell."

Willis wiped a sweaty hand nervously on his trouser leg. He asked, "But why? They've got us outnumbered better than three to one."

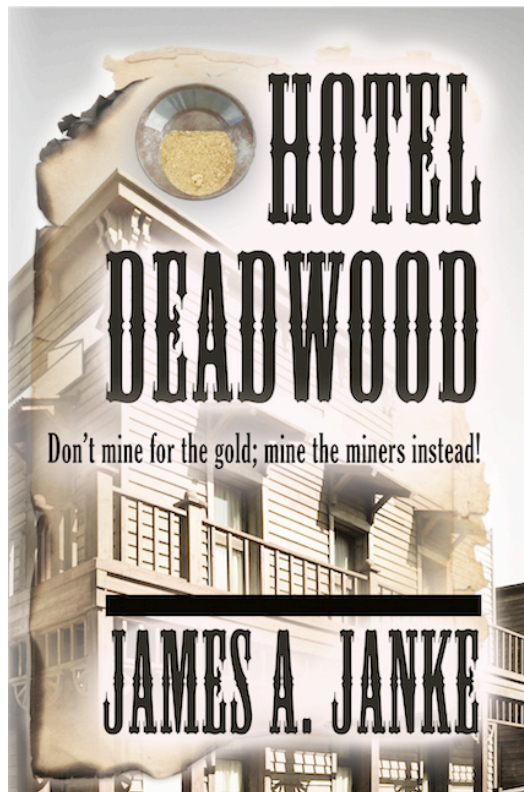
Owen said, "We must've caught them completely by surprise. With all the racket we just put up they must have thought there were fifty of us. So they bolted. At Fort Pierre they said the Sioux weren't foolhardy. When in doubt, they run."

Lucas said, "We are so goddamned lucky."

Owen let out a sharp breath of air. "Yeah. For now." He fished frantically in his pockets for more cartridges. He started shoving the fresh rounds into the gate of the receiver on the side of the Winchester. "Reload, fellas, reload."

The others quickly copied him. Lucas fumbled some cartridges, and they fell to the ground. "Dammit," he muttered. He lunged for the cartridges and snapped them up from the sod.

Owen finished reloading his Winchester. He said, "Now let's go collect that gent and his wagon and get the hell outa here. Fast."



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