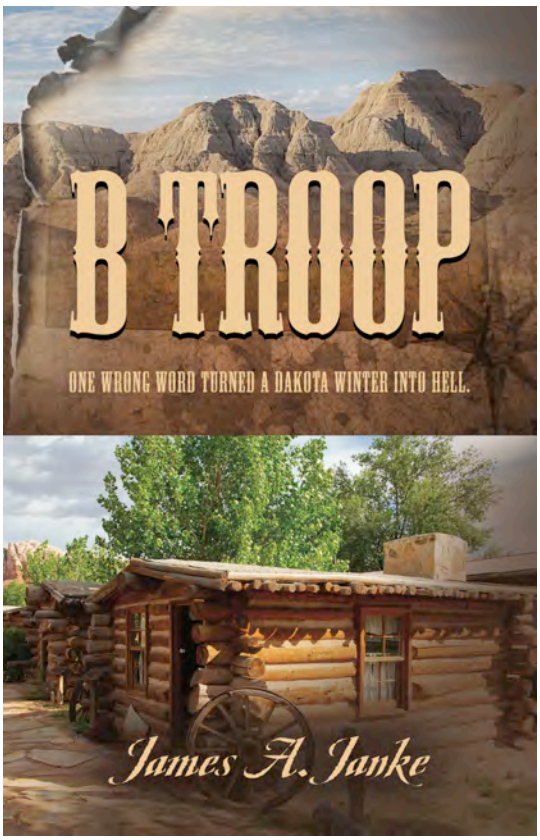


Corporal John Taylor, one of "Custer's avengers," is bored and lonely. But his life and that of B Troop explodes in violence and tragedy when a single ill-chosen word by the local Indian agent sends a reservation's Sioux people on a desperate dash for Canada during a brutal Dakota winter, relentlessly pursued by a determined cavalry column.

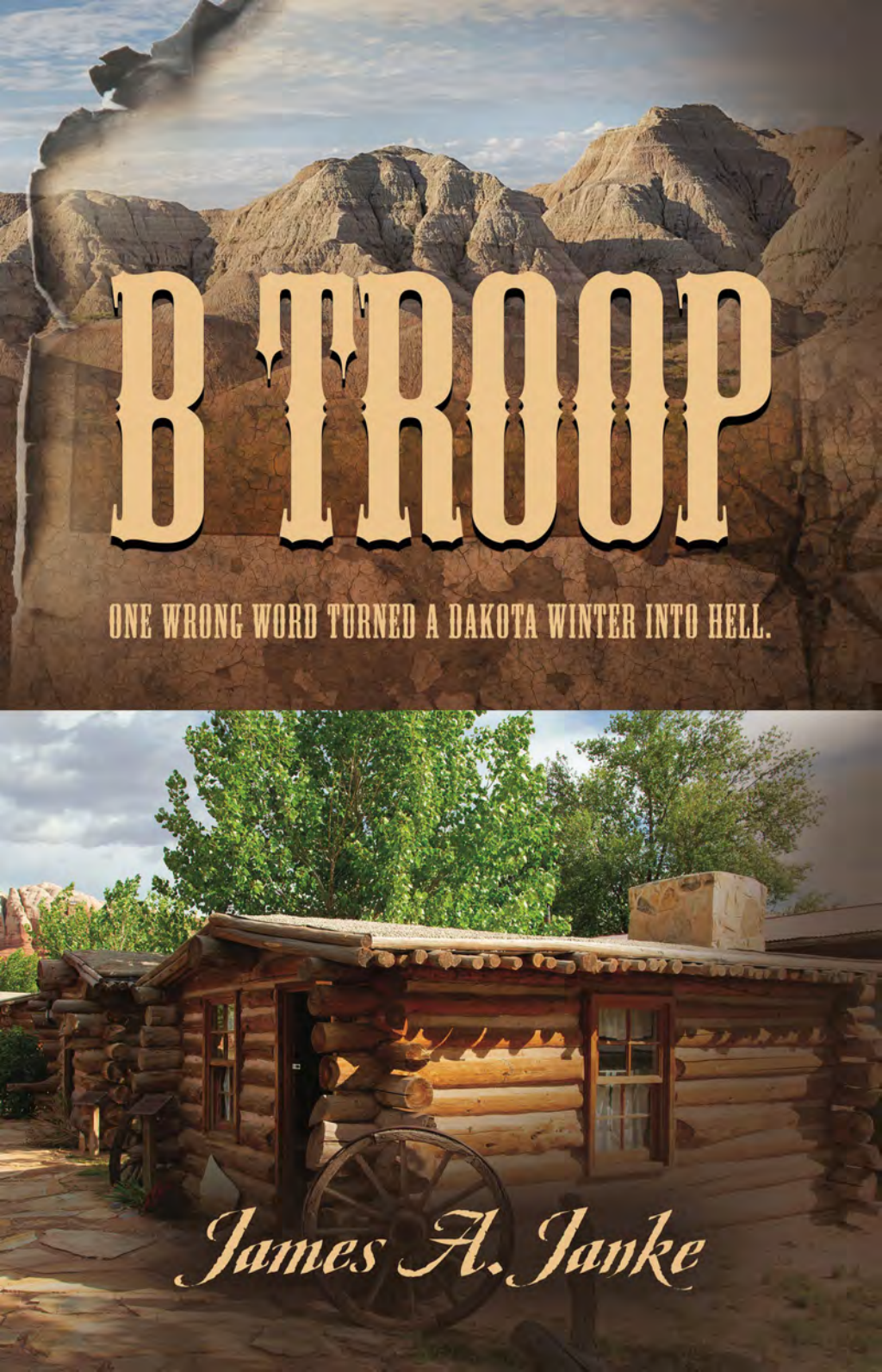
B Troop:
One wrong word turned a Dakota winter into hell.

By James A. Janke

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11196.html?s=pdf

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.


B TROOP
ONE WRONG WORD TURNED A DAKOTA WINTER INTO HELL.
James A. Janke

BOOKS BY JAMES A. JANKE

WESTERNS

Jeremiah Bacon

Canyon Treasure

A Tin Star for Braddock

Blood on the Wind River Mountains

Last Boat to Fort Benton

Winter Kill

Last Stage to Laramie

Ten Percent to Tombstone

Hotel Deadwood

Oro Diablo

B Troop

GAVIN MACKENZIE
CIVIL WAR NAVAL ADVENTURES

The Carolinas

Duel at Hampton Roads

Print ISBN: 978-1-64718-869-6
Epub ISBN: 978-1-64718-870-2
Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64718-871-9

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

Printed on acid-free paper

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

Chapter One

Fort Grummond
Dakota Territory
November 1879

John Taylor, Corporal, United States Cavalry, used his wooden bucket to smash through the thin crust of ice on the creek behind the stables.

"Hey!" the trooper kneeling next to Taylor blurted. He wiped drops of frigid water from his face. "That water's freezin', Johnny." He had been scooping up water into his own bucket.

Taylor chuckled. "Sorry, Hugo," he said. He plunged his bucket into the creek and filled it half full.

Hugo Schuster stood up with his bucket. "Pretty soon we'll need an axe to break through the ice." He sighed. "Another damn Dakota winter comin'."

"Yeah," Taylor said. "Too bad the horses don't want hot coffee in the afternoon instead of water."

Schuster laughed. "That'd be welcome."

Taylor stood up too. He started back up the path toward the stables.

Schuster fell in beside him. "At least there's no snow yet this year. At least none that stayed."

"No," Taylor said. There had been snow in late October, but it had melted.

They stepped around a few other troopers coming down the path with buckets of their own.

"You done readin' that book yet, Johnny?" Schuster asked.

"*Around the World in Eighty Days*?" Taylor asked. "Gees, Hugo, I just started it."

"I thought you was readin' *Tom Sawyer*."

"Finished that one two days ago," Taylor said.

"Well, hell, who's got it now? I didn't see it on the troop shelf."

Taylor shrugged. "Don't know. You've got to be quicker, Hugo."

"Oh, well," Schuster said. "Not like I haven't read it before."

Taylor grinned. "Yeah. A common problem. How about *Moby Dick*? I'm pretty sure that's still on the shelf."

"Oh, I dunno," Schuster said.

"It's a whale of a read," Taylor said.

Schuster smirked and rolled his eyes. "Johnny, that joke is so old, it

smells like a dead fish."

"Sorry," Taylor said. But he was grinning.

Schuster sighed. "Wish the troop fund weren't so short o' cash. So we could buy some *new* books. I'm dyin' for somethin' new to read."

"Come payday, I'll join you again in making that our top priority suggestion at the troop meeting."

"Okay, Johnny. But payday's a long way off. It's not exactly regular anyway."

"No," Taylor said. "Good point."

"And I think many of the other boys will go for more newspaper subscriptions again."

"Yeah, probably."

"You suppose you could ask your folks back in Minnesota for an early Christmas present of some books? Like they sent last year?"

"Sure, I'll ask," Taylor said. He stopped and turned to the side and looked out onto the prairie. He rested a fist on his hip.

Schuster stopped. "Johnny?"

"You made me think of home, Hugo."

"A long way off, Johnny," Schuster said.

"A long way off," Taylor repeated. "In miles and days."

"Yeah," Schuster said. "I know the feelin' myself." He waited. But Taylor kept staring into the distance. "Well, don't be dreamin' too long," Schuster said. "Reiter'll be on your ass."

"No, I won't," Taylor said. He didn't want to invite the displeasure of B Troop's 1st Sgt. Thomas Reiter.

Schuster resumed his walk toward the stables. But Taylor continued to stare out onto the distant prairie. The view was not unattractive to him, bleak though the aspect was. The day was cold, but windless. Also sunless and misty. The air was a translucent, crystalline white, and every stalk of withered, yellow grass had a glaze of hoarfrost on it. The whole panorama had a stark, eerie beauty to it.

He didn't bother to look in any other direction, for Fort Grummond floated in a sea of grass, and the view in one direction was the same as in any other direction. Every mile between the fort and the Missouri River way to the east—or way, way to the north—consisted of the same gently-rolling, treeless prairie. So different from Minnesota and its rich farmlands, lakes, and forests.

Sound carried easily in the still air. Taylor could distinctly hear the troopers grooming their horses in the stables nearby. He could hear troopers' boots crunch the frozen grass as the men headed for the stream for water. And

he could hear the snuffling of contented horses, a sound that always pleased Taylor.

There were no palisades to block his view, for the fort had been constructed on the premise that troopers should depend on alertness and carbines for protection rather than on walls. The fort was named in honor of Lt. George W. Grummond, who had been killed by Indians in the so-called Fetterman Massacre at Fort Phil Kearny in 1866. But even in that infamous fight, the Indians hadn't attacked the fort directly.

Fort Grummond was a relatively small post, not like bustling, sprawling establishments like Fort Laramie. This garrison consisted of only three cavalry troops—B, C, and H—of its regiment and a solitary infantry company, D, of a different regiment. Taylor had been surprised when he first heard of infantry companies being posted on the Western frontier. How could infantry keep up with cavalry or advance against Indians mounted on horses? But long campaigns were hard on horses. Soldiers in this infantry company were happy to point out to the troopers that on a long expedition, marching soldiers would outlast horses, and all the cavalrymen would be afoot eventually anyway. "And then we eat the horses." That was always followed by scornful laughter.

Nominally, there should have been about 400 officers and men at Fort Grummond, but every unit was well below allotted strength. In fact, there were fewer than 200 troopers and infantrymen at the fort.

The fort had been established partly to protect travelers and the very few settlers in the area from the depredations of Indians, but principally it was to act as an enforcing presence for the Buffalo Creek Indian Agency. The reservation and the agency lay about 20 miles to the west of the fort, and they were under the direction of an Indian Agent, Orville Scheid.

But the reservation and, indeed, the area in general was quiet. To be sure, the Sioux were embittered and sullen, understandably so, but they were also pragmatic. Hence, they were quiet. Very quiet. Scheid rarely called upon the garrison for assistance in any capacity.

And that was the constant and growing complaint that gnawed at Taylor: *He was bored*.

Oh, it had been different in the beginning. Taylor was one of "Custer's Avengers." He had enlisted in July 1876, a month after Custer's disastrous defeat on the Little Big Horn. But Taylor had not really been out for hot-blooded revenge; he had signed up for the sheer excitement of the prospect, a chance to get off the family farm and see the elephant. Custer had merely been a pretext.

Taylor had grown up listening to his father's tales of the Civil War—the campaigning, the camaraderie, the battles, and the blood. He had often heard his father relate in hushed tones how he had miraculously survived the 1st Minnesota's charge on the second day at Gettysburg; the regiment had 85% casualties in the eight companies who had made the charge. His father would shake his head and say what a terrible thing the war was. But—God forgive him—he would also allow that the war had been the most exciting time in his whole life. For Taylor's father nothing that came before or after the Civil War came close to reaching the stirring intensity of the war.

So, when Custer met his match at the Little Big Horn, Taylor had seized the opportunity. He loved horses, so cavalry was a natural for him anyway. And he wanted to see the West, to see Indians, to fight in a battle. He had visions of sabers clanking, bugles blowing, the US cavalry swooping down in holy vengeance upon the Sioux and the Cheyenne, and all the soldiers basking in honored heroes' glory. The adventure of a lifetime.

And at first it *was* exciting, or at least stimulating. Well, his initial training post at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, had been rather disillusioning. Poor rations, insufferable sergeants, pompous officers. And the only real training he remembered was policing the grounds and doing odd jobs for the officers. There was no adventure in any of it.

However, at the time he had thought that Jefferson Barracks was just a temporary aberration. He thought that once out on the frontier he would have his battles and his adventure.

On the frontier it was all new. Far away from home for the first time, in a completely different environment, different culture. Farm boys grew up rough and tough, so Taylor was good with his fists, and he had risen steadily up the pecking order in the troop. He was an excellent rider. And he had started hunting when his rifle was longer than he was tall, so he was a much better marksman than almost all the other troopers, many of whom came from cities and had never fired a weapon before. And officers had picked him out as someone with a natural leadership ability. He had made corporal fairly quickly.

But there had been no battles, no blood, no heart-pounding kill-or-be-killed excitement. He seldom even saw an Indian. It turned out that Custer's defeat had been the last gasp of the Sioux and the Cheyenne. Never again did the Indians concentrate in such overwhelming numbers. There were fights with the Indians after that, but they were small and scattered and far away from Taylor. The Sioux had virtually all surrendered long before he had even reached Dakota Territory. And although the training at Fort Grummond had

been more purposeful than had been that at Jefferson Barracks, there had never been an occasion to use it.

Even when Sitting Bull had come down from his self-imposed exile in Canada the past summer to raid, the chief had skittered back across the international border before General Miles from Fort Keogh on the Yellowstone had gotten within fifty miles of him. And Fort Grummond was stuck near an agency that never had the slightest bit of trouble from the Sioux.

Taylor didn't know whether to attribute that calm to the Indian Agent for being good at his job or to the Indians for being clever. For "everyone" in the Army was sure that agency Indians went raiding every summer off the reservations. They were just very careful not to start any trouble on or near the reservations themselves.

So, no battles, no glory, no adventure. But there *was* routine, mind-numbing routine. Regimentation, harsh discipline, poor and infrequent pay, bland and inadequate food, drill, and fatigue duty—meaning manual labor, like digging ditches and constructing buildings. A trooper's day was controlled by the bugle. An enormous gulf existed between enlisted men and officers, and sergeants could be bullies. Entertainment was sparse, healthcare was incompetent, leaves almost nonexistent, towns too far away.

And civilian society in general had a low opinion of, even disdain for the post-Civil War volunteer regular Army. Nothing like the acclaim and appreciation and respect heaped on his father as a Civil War soldier and veteran. Taylor was grateful, though, that at least his parents were proud of his enlisting.

Taylor hadn't given much thought to just how long a five-year enlistment really was when he signed on the dotted line. He wasn't homesick; he was just sick of the Army. *Bored*. A helluva a way to spend the best years of his youth, wasted. How come enlistments couldn't have been for two years instead of five?

"Corp. Taylor!" a man boomed from the stables. That was Sergeant Douglas Davis. The troopers called him Dee Dee—but not to his face. "What the hell you starin' at?"

Taylor flinched. "Nothing, Sergeant." He turned quickly and hustled back toward the stables. The stables at Fort Grummond were more like long, flimsy sheds open on one side. Sort of nothing more than covered picket lines.

"Get your ass back here and tend to your animal!"

"Yes, Sergeant," Taylor said.

Taylor reached B Troop's stable and went down the rear of the line of horses, toward where his set of four—Sean O'Dea, himself, Linus Skinner,

and Hans Klausmeyer—had their stalls, in that order. There were no walls between stalls. Stalls were just spots along the side of the building to which each horse was tethered.

Each horse along the way had a trooper busily grooming his mount. Curry combs and brushes clicked. A horse or two snorted.

Taylor nodded to a few of the men or greeted some casually. Some of the men talked quietly among themselves, but Reiter frowned on too much visiting. "Stay on task, troopers!"

Taylor set the bucket of water down in front of his horse and removed the nosebag from the animal. "Drink up, Austin," he said. Taylor didn't live near the town of Austin; he just liked the name. But the name did confuse people:

"Taylor, you don't sound like a Texan."

"That's Austin, Minnesota, not Austin, Texas."

Reiter had scoffed at his wanting to name his mount after a city. But the rules said a trooper could name his horse, and rules were rules in the Army. And Taylor had squelched Reiter's complaint entirely when Taylor pointed out that Gen. Grant's favorite horse was named Cincinnati.

Austin snuffled contentedly and lowered his muzzle down to the water.

Taylor stroked the horse's neck fondly. Then he ran a hand over the animal's broad back. A horse was a magnificent animal.

Taylor turned the nosebag upside down, tapped on its bottom once to knock out any remaining grain, and then hung the bag on a hook on the wall.

Taylor picked up his brush and began the twice daily routine of brushing his mount. He started on the off side—the right side—of Austin's head and face, brushing and cleaning carefully, especially around the eyes, and paying close attention to any dust about the roots of the horse's ears. He used the curry comb frequently to remove accumulated hair from the brush.

He threw Austin's mane over to the near side—the left side—and brushed down his neck. Then he moved to the horse's muscular shoulder.

He enjoyed brushing down Austin as much as the horse enjoyed being brushed. The brushing facilitated the bond formed between horse and trooper. And Taylor never got bored of caring for his horse.

Taylor took pride in Austin being about the strongest, biggest, hardiest mount in the garrison, second only to the horse of Maj. Nelson Prescott, the fort's second-in-command. And to Taylor's mind Austin was one of the best-looking horses as well. At least of those horses assigned to enlisted men. The best-looking horse in the troop belonged to 2nd Lt. Joshua Templeton, B Troop's second in command. His horse was a beautiful and expensive black mount he called Xerxes. He had brought the animal with him from out East.

Taylor brushed Austin's breast, belly, flank, loins, back and legs. He finished the off side with a wisp of hay, slightly dampened from any remaining water in the bucket. He moved around to the near side and started brushing Austin down from that side, starting at the horse's head again.

Reiter stopped at Taylor's stall. "Corp. Taylor," he said.

Taylor turned to face the noncommissioned officer, who was standing with his hands clasped behind his back. "Yes, Sergeant?" He feared Reiter was going to assign him extra duty for his slacking off earlier to ponder the frozen prairie.

But Reiter said, "Corp. Sands is ill. You're corporal of the guard again tonight. So your set of four is on guard duty again."

Taylor's shoulders slumped. Guard duty was very boring duty in a military life of boredom. "Again, already, Sergeant?" He tried not to sound as if he were complaining, but simply curious or puzzled. But it did sound like he was whining.

Reiter raised his eyebrows and stared at Taylor for a few seconds. "How long have you been in this man's Army, Corporal?"

Reiter always asked that question to tell a man that complaining or even asking for a rationale was futile. And *arguing* would have been almost fatal. The 1st sergeant seemed to think he was being clever. The company sergeants, Louis Baker and Davis, would simply have snapped the trooper's head off. Taylor would have said nothing to either of those men. But Reiter knew the power he had in the troop, and he knew the troopers knew it, too, so he didn't have to be touchy about it.

Taylor said, "Three years, four months, and a few days, Sergeant."

"So-o-o?" Reiter asked in a drawl.

"So I have duty tonight as corporal of the guard. Thank you, Sergeant."

Reiter nodded and moved off.

Taylor sighed. "Damn," he muttered. He went back to stroking Austin's neck, giving the chore some extra energy. The horse looked at him. "Oh, sorry, Austin," Taylor said. "Got a little rough there, huh?"

Suddenly he stopped. He glanced up at Pvt. Linus Skinner, who had turned around from his own mount and was staring at Taylor over Austin's back. He held a brush in one hand and the curry comb in the other hand.

Taylor didn't like Skinner. He didn't like his slovenly, unkempt habits, his disheveled appearance in a profession not known for sartorial high standards anyway. He didn't like Skinner's round, ugly, fat face, his bitter lack of humor, his sour disposition, or his contempt for everything and everybody. Taylor wondered what terrible wrong he had done to have God

punish him by getting Skinner assigned to his set of four.

At least Skinner wasn't his bunkie, a man he would have to share a two-man dog tent with occasionally or pair up with in a battle. Sean O'Dea was Taylor's bunkie. Hans Klausmeyer had the misfortune to be Skinner's bunkie.

Though Klausmeyer didn't seem to mind that arrangement. But then, nothing seemed to faze the chunky German. He was stolid and unperturbable. He was a good deal older than Taylor, and he had served in the Prussian army and had fought in pitched battles in Europe as well as skirmishes. He told fascinating tales of his experience in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and how he had marched into Paris after the French had lost a war they had been foolish enough to start themselves. Paris and France and Prussia. They all seemed so exotic to a young man from Minnesota who hadn't left the state until he had enlisted in the Army.

Klausmeyer, like O'Dea, too, was a recent immigrant. Many recruits were immigrants. And with all his military experience, Klausmeyer found that the United States Army was delighted to have him. He was the only man in the troop who was a better marksman than Taylor. The two best shots in the troop being in his set of four meant they were always the first set behind the commanding officer on the march. The officer wanted his best marksmen where they were handiest to him.

And Klausmeyer, like many immigrants who didn't speak English, found the Army a good place to learn the language. He always carried a small pocket dictionary. And he regularly bought newspapers for himself at the sutler's store and carried those around too, until they completely fell apart from constant folding.

Taylor asked, "What do you want, Skinner?"

"I heard that," Skinner said quietly, almost in a whisper.

All the men on the line talked quietly when Reiter was prowling the stables, so Taylor was not surprised at Skinner's conspiratorial tone.

"Heard what?"

"I heard you swear, Taylor," Skinner said.

Taylor smirked. "And you don't?"

"Hell, the only thing that gets you mad enough to swear is the goddamned Army."

Taylor snorted. Skinner was probably half-right about that. He did tend to lag far behind other troopers in the use of profanity. He considered it an exercise in self-control, and he liked to be in control. Which was ironic, given that he was in the Army, which had complete control over his body and life. But not his mind—yet. And maybe not his soul.

Taylor said, "Get back to your grooming, Private." He started brushing Austin's neck and shoulder.

Skinner said, "You bein' corporal of the guard tonight would make it damned easy for you to separate yourself from the Army tonight. Take the grand bounce."

Taylor shuddered. He looked both ways furtively. Reiter was all the way at the other end of the stables. Other troopers down the line weren't reacting.

Taylor snapped his head around and leaned toward Skinner. "Are you crazy?" he hissed. "Saying something like that out here?"

"Aw, shit," Skinner scoffed. He blew his nose into the straw and then wiped a sleeve across his face. "Reiter can't hear us, and nobody else would care anyway. With our set of four on guard duty tonight again, we get another perfect chance. We could all leave together."

Taylor snapped, "I told you I'm not interested. Get back to your horse." He started brushing Austin vigorously. The horse fidgeted.

Skinner said, "Bullshit, Taylor. If you wasn't interested, you'd've told Reiter about me long ago."

Taylor didn't respond. What would have been the point of telling the 1st sergeant that Skinner was thinking of deserting? Reiter would not have been surprised. A third of recruits deserted before their enlistments were up. And what would Reiter have done about it anyway?

Deserting back in the Civil War could get a man shot. But desertion from the peacetime regular Army was not viewed so seriously, even by the Army itself. Many civilians thought a trooper who deserted was just using good sense and would even help the deserter. Few deserters were ever caught. The Army set off in pursuit of deserters mainly to get back the horse and equipment the deserter usually took with him. If caught, the deserter would face no worse punishment than serving out the remainder of his enlistment period in prison, albeit at hard labor probably.

Taylor whispered, "Skinner, even if I was going to take French leave, I wouldn't abandon my post and leave the fort unguarded."

Skinner scoffed. "Unguarded from what? Hell, the nearest Indian is twenty miles away at the agency. And they never start anythin' anyway."

Taylor said, "Drop it, Skinner."

But Skinner didn't. "Dutch and Mick are both eager. We're just waitin' for you."

Klausmeyer's name was inconvenient to say, so everyone called him Dutch, a corruption of Deutsch, meaning German. And Skinner shared a common prejudice against the Irish, and so he used the derogatory term Mick

for O'Dea.

Taylor leaned toward Skinner and spoke quietly. "Ok, I'm bored with the Army, Skinner, but I gave my word."

"Shit," Skinner commented. "What's your word worth?"

"I signed a paper for five years, and five years is—"

"A helluva long time," Skinner said. "That's what five years is, Taylor."

"I'd never be able to go back home."

"That's your own damn fault for usin' your real name to enlist," Skinner said.

"I'm proud of my name, Skinner, and I want to keep it. Besides, my folks would be ashamed to death once they found out."

"Fuck 'em, Taylor. Don't let 'em find out," Skinner said.

Taylor shook his head.

"Shit." Skinner turned back to his own horse and started brushing. But he quickly turned back to face Taylor. "What do you owe the Army, Taylor?"

"Skinner, we've been through this before."

"So they made you a corporal. Two fancy chevrons on your sleeves and a half-inch yellow stripe down your pantleg. Big fuckin' deal."

"Skinner, you hate anyone with ambition or talent or integrity or—"

"Don't make me puke, Taylor. No stripes are worth playin' kiss-ass with no shit-faced officers."

"I didn't play kiss-ass with any officers, Skinner."

"How much more they pay you than me, Taylor? Huh? Two bucks a month. You make a shitty fifteen dollars a month. A goddamned cowboy makes twice that."

"I didn't work for these stripes for the money," Taylor said.

"And a cowhand can come and go as he pleases, quit whenever he wants, not take a load of shit from officers and sergeants. And he can get paid in gold, so's he don't have to worry 'bout storekeepers discountin' his pay thirty or forty percent for changin' the greenbacks into gold."

"Skinner, forget it," Taylor said. "An oath is an oath."

"Oh, pu-lease," Skinner said.

Taylor set to brushing Austin's leg. What infuriated Taylor the most was that he thought Skinner's arguments had merit. He dreaded spending more years in the Army. He longed for the end of his enlistment. But he wouldn't quit.

Skinner hissed at Klausmeyer. "Hey, Dutch."

"Ja?"

Skinner jerked his head in Taylor's direction. "Talk to him, Dutch," he

whispered. “We’re all on guard duty again tonight. This could be the night.”

Klausmeyer moved away from his horse and picked up a pitchfork leaning against a post. Klausmeyer had given his horse the full name of Frederick the Great, after a former king of Prussia. But in practice, Klausmeyer simply called the horse Fritz, which had also been a nickname of the monarch.

Skinner had never bothered to give his horse a name.

Klausmeyer started to move straw around, moving closer to Taylor and Austin.

“Corporal?” Klausmeyer said. “Vhy not?” He kept his head and his voice down. He shuffled straw around.

“Why are you in such a hurry to quit, Dutch?” Taylor asked. “Thought you wanted to learn English better.”

“Ja, ja,” Klausmeyer said. “But I have mein dictionary here.” He patted a pocket in his pants. “Und mein newspapers. Und you could help me.”

“You’ve been talking to Skinner too much, Dutch,” Taylor said. He wasn’t trying to be funny. He set the brush and curry comb down and picked up a grooming cloth. He brushed down Austin’s hide, moving in the direction of the hair.

Klausmeyer chuckled. “Vell, dat may be true.”

“Besides, you never complain about anything. I don’t believe you’re the type to skip out.”

“Vell, I desert before, remember?”

Taylor smiled. Klausmeyer had deserted from the Prussian army so he could come to America. “Good point, Dutch.”

Reiter bellowed from down the row of horses. “Taylor, Klausmeyer!”

Taylor and Klausmeyer both froze.

Reiter shouted, “Stop your jabberin’ and get back to work!”

“Yes, Sergeant!”

“Jawohl, Herr Sergeant.”

Klausmeyer set the pitchfork back against the post. Before he went back to his horse he said to Taylor, “I could do vitout dat. Had enough in Prussia. You tink about it.”

Taylor was rubbing down Austin’s croup. “Dutch, I’ve had my fill of the Army, but—”

O’Dea, on the other side of Taylor in the line, was grooming his own horse, Dublin. O’Dea had copied Taylor’s approach to naming his horse. He deliberately bumped into Taylor. “Johnny, m’boy,” he said.

Taylor looked at O’Dea’s smiling face. The Irishman was a distinct

contrast to Klausmeyer. He was taller than Taylor and even slimmer. And he always seemed to be grinning. A smile seemed to be his natural facial expression. So a smile on O'Dea's face didn't necessarily reflect mirth. And where Klausmeyer was reticent, O'Dea was garrulous.

Taylor said, "You going to work on me, too, Sean?"

"Johnny, m'boy, when the snow piles up to the rooftops and the wind blasts those little devils of ice crystals through every crack in the barrack walls—Faith and begorrah! 'Tis in sunshine in Arizona I want to be spendin' me winters. Playin' baseball even in January."

Baseball was one of the fort's few recreations. Skinner was one of the few men who wouldn't join in.

O'Dea said, "I'm no snowbird like Piggy there." He nodded toward Skinner. "Wantin' to spend me winters in this frozen hell. Oink, oink."

"Damn you, Mick," Skinner said. "I'm no snowbird. If I signed up last fall for a warm fire and grub for the winter here, then why did I stick around when spring come?"

Taylor had wondered that himself, given how eager Skinner was to desert now.

O'Dea said, "Why, faith, and 'tis the whores at the hog ranch on Dead Squaw Creek that keeps you here." He grimaced in disgust. "Yuck."

"Don't you look down your nose at me, you damned Mick," Skinner insisted, more loudly than Taylor liked.

"Keep it down," Taylor said. "For God's sake, quiet."

Skinner continued. "Mick, you're not man enough to take on even one o' his women, much less all three at once like I do."

"Hmph," O'Dea snorted. "I've got me standards, Piggy. How anybody even thinks o' screwin' one of those sows is—"

"Ja," Klausmeyer joined in, chuckling. "I go der vonce. But jus' von look at dose vomen und I come right back. Ugh."

"A whore's a whore, Dutch," Skinner declared. "You bastards act like I was the only trooper who ever goes down there."

Taylor said, "Skinner, the lowest a whore can sink is to service soldiers. But the other men go there because there isn't any other choice. You go there because you prefer it."

O'Dea and Klausmeyer laughed.

Skinner asked, "Don't you ever want to get fucked, Taylor?"

"Sure, but I'm going to wait for a woman I can love and who'll love me back."

"Oh, Jesus," Skinner said. "I'm gonna puke. You're a fuckin'

saint, Taylor."

Taylor grinned. There was a clever double meaning to that insult. But he didn't think Skinner had meant it intentionally or would even understand the humor of it. Taylor said, "And I want a woman who won't give me the clap, Skinner."

O'Dea laughed.

Klausmeyer, frowning, asked, "Vhat ist dis clap you say?" He clapped his hands together a couple of times lightly. "Like dat?"

Taylor smiled. "No, Dutch, *the* clap is a disease you pick up from unclean whores. *A* clap is what you were doing just now."

"Clap," Klausmeyer repeated. "Confusin'. Much of English like dat."

Taylor nodded. "Yes. Same word but different uses."

O'Dea said, "Piggy, do they actually make you pay for them sluts?"

"Your money's gone as fast as mine is, Mick."

Taylor said, "He's got a point there, Sean." He grinned at O'Dea. He put the grooming cloth back on its nail and reached for a grooming sponge. He dipped it in the water bucket and squeezed excess water out of it.

"Ah, Johnny, m'boy, 'tis me drinkin' at the sutler's saloon you be referrin' to." He held up a hand. "Guilty. Next to brawlin' I loves me liquor best. Johnny, m'boy, how you manage to save any o' your pay escapes me."

Taylor said, "I've got over a hundred dollars stashed away." He was washing out Austin's eyes and peering carefully into them.

"Faith and begorrah," O'Dea said.

"Someday I'm going to get married, Sean." He moved down to Austin's nostrils and started gently wiping. "And—"

Reiter's booming voice from right behind them instantly halted the conversation. "Damn me, Corp. Taylor. It's a goddamned kaffeeklatsch goin' on here."

All four troopers jumped. Taylor poked Austin hard enough that the horse snorted and jerked his head back. O'Dea fell to briskly brushing his horse's near-side flank. Skinner and Klausmeyer both brushed at their horses.

"Seein' as how you four have so much spare time on your hands, you can all come back here after supper and clean the stables."

Four sets of shoulders slumped. "Yes, Sergeant. Aye, Sergeant. Jawohl, Herr Sergeant."

"Now get back to work!" Reiter shouted. "Stay on task."

"Yes, Sergeant. Aye, Sergeant. Jawohl, Herr Sergeant."

O'Dea, flustered, picked up his water bucket and headed for the stream.

"Halt," Reiter ordered.

O'Dea froze.

"Haven't you already watered your horse, O'Dea?"

"Aye, Sergeant, but he still seems thirsty."

"Hm. Well, okay. Go get him some more water."

"Aye, Sergeant." O'Dea hustled away from the stables.

Reiter harumphed and stomped down the line of horses.

Taylor sighed. Guard duty *and* stable duty on the same day. Extra stable duty was used so often as punishment that almost no trooper had to clean stables *except* as punishment.

Skinner muttered, "Goddamned son-of-a-bitch."

Taylor said, "He's a good soldier, Skinner. Dare say he'll never make the same out of you." He finished Austin's nostrils and headed for the animal's rear.

Skinner snorted. "And what use is there for that anyway?"

"You might need it someday."

"For what?"

"For the Sioux, dummy." Taylor gave Austin's anus a swipe with the sponge.

"Shit," Skinner said. "How often do we even see an Indian around here? That agent Scheid don't want no soldier blue near his precious Sioux."

"You never know," Taylor said. "Look at the Meeker massacre back in September and October."

Ute Indians on the White River Indian Reservation in northwestern Colorado attacked the Indian Agency there, killed the Indian Agent, Nathan Meeker, and his ten male employees and took their women and children as hostages. The Utes then ambushed a cavalry column sent to the agency's rescue in a week-long engagement called the Battle of Milk River. Casualties were heavy on both sides. More cavalry eventually succeeded in capturing the remaining Utes and freeing the hostages.

"Yeah, well, those were Utes," Skinner said. "Mean bastards."

Taylor said, "They killed the commanding officer of the column sent to aid Meeker, Maj. Thomas Thornburgh, and more than a dozen troopers."

"Like I said," Skinner said, but he didn't finish the statement.

Taylor thought Skinner was giving the disaster serious thought. Taylor said, "The Utes there may have given the Sioux here ideas."

Skinner shrugged. "Not that we've heard."

They were interrupted by a distant splash and a blast of profanity from O'Dea at the creek. Laughter from other troopers at the creek didn't help O'Dea's disposition. From the stables O'Dea could be seen rising from the

creek's icy water, dripping and shivering.

All the men of B Troop stopped their work and listened to O'Dea curse. He had an extensive vocabulary and an accent that made it all sound poetic. Even Reiter listened patiently with an appreciative grin on his face.

O'Dea was the troubadour of the entire garrison. In the barracks in the evening he could have the men rolling on the floor in laughter with his bawdy lyrics or have them dabbing at their eyes with a rendition of some mournful Irish ballad. And the only times there were more than a handful of men in the chapel on a Sunday were those days when O'Dea used his rich baritone on some hymns, during his periodic bouts of getting religious.

Taylor looked at Skinner. The man wasn't even grinning. Skinner rarely laughed, and he never shed a tear. Taylor shook his head. He rinsed out the sponge and put it back on the shelf on the stable wall. Other troopers went back to their chores.

"Taylor?" Skinner said.

"What?" He looked back at Skinner.

Skinner said, "Okay, maybe you won't go, but if the three of us try it tonight without you, would you try to stop us?"

"Skinner, if the three of you slipped out while I was corporal of the guard, I'd be lucky if they just shot me."

"Ja," Klausmeyer added from behind Skinner. "Nein, Skinner. I don't vant to get der Corporal in trouble. I von't go vitout Johnny."

"Damn all o' you," Skinner muttered. "Even you, Dutch. Bunkie or not."

"Ja, ja," Klausmeyer said, smiling.

Taylor had to smile at that himself. He recognized that Klausmeyer was the only man in the troop that Skinner tried not to antagonize. Bunkies were like that.

Reiter called out, "O'Dea!"

O'Dea had been walking back up the path, carrying his bucket of water. Water dripped from his uniform. He stopped. "Sergeant?"

Reiter said, "Put that bucket down and go get into dry clothes. You'll freeze to death before you get to the stables."

"Thank you, Sergeant," O'Dea said brightly.

"Don't thank me, O'Dea," Reiter said. "I just don't want any man here wastin' his time draggin' your sorry dead carcass away."

"No, Sergeant." O'Dea sounded a bit deflated, but it also sounded like he had been smiling when he spoke.

"And to help you learn not to be so damned clumsy, you'll polish all the boots of a dozen men in your troop this evening."

Now O'Dea did sound deflated. "Aye, Sergeant."

O'Dea put the bucket down and started off toward the barracks.

Taylor said, "Skinner, why don't you just take off by yourself someday?" He'd be glad to see him gone.

"I'm not fool enough to go travelin' alone in this country," Skinner answered. "That's too much temptation for some young Sioux bucks."

"Afraid?" Klausmeyer asked with a smile.

"No," Skinner snapped. "But I ain't stupid neither, Dutch. I mean to live a long time."

"Probably will, too," Taylor mumbled. Life wasn't fair.

Skinner spat into the straw. "I'll be at your funeral, you goddamned saint, Taylor. You'll be in heaven long before I'm in hell."

"Vell, speak o' der devil," Klausmeyer said. "Der's dat Indian agent, Herr Scheid." He nodded toward the road leading into the fort's parade grounds. A horse and buckboard had just arrived.

Taylor added, "And his daughter, Jeannie. Oh, my, my."

Klausmeyer nodded. "Ja, ein sehr schönes Mädchen." He gave a soft whistle.

Jeannie Scheid was seventeen with long blonde hair kept in place with a bonnet. At the moment she was bundled in a heavy coat, but Taylor remembered her well back in summer when a simple dress accentuated her young woman's attractive figure. And he thought she had the most beautiful face he'd ever seen on a woman. He clearly remembered each time he had seen her over the last year or so, especially those few times when he had actually gotten to exchange a few words with her. Far too few.

And seeing Jeannie heightened Taylor's dissatisfaction with the Army. How could he ever meet and marry—or even just meet—an eligible young woman out here on the Dakota prairie? Boredom was bad enough, but frustration and lost opportunities were achingly worse. And Jeannie Scheid, specifically, might just as well have been living on the moon.

Skinner said, "Now there's a piece of ass I'd loved to poke all night."

Taylor felt like punching Skinner. "Skinner, you're disgusting."

"Bullshit, Taylor," Skinner said. "You're thinkin' the same thing. You just won't admit it, not out loud at least."

Taylor didn't say anything. Skinner was right. Still, he wouldn't have expressed it so crudely. More like: My heart's desire would be to make tender love to that angel throughout a blessed night of bliss. Or something like that.

Klausmeyer asked, "Vhy dey here, you suppose?"

Scheid had stopped the buckboard in front of the fort headquarters. He

helped Jeannie down from the wagon. Then he stepped up onto the porch of the building. Jeannie went in the other direction.

Taylor said, "She's headed for the sutler's store, but it looks like Scheid is going to see the colonel."

"Mus' be important," Klausmeyer said.

"Who gives a shit?" Skinner muttered.

O'Dea, walking past the end of the stables, started singing Stephen Foster's ballad:

> *I dream of Jeanie with the light brown hair,*
> *Borne, like a vapor, on the summer air;*
> *I see her tripping where the bright streams play,*
> *Happy as the daisies that dance on her way.*

O'Dea bowed toward Jeannie Scheid at a distance, and she smiled and nodded to him in return, pleased at his vocal compliment.

And in the stables, many of the troopers joined Taylor, unavoidably affected by O'Dea's rendering, in a carnal fantasy as each man watched Jeannie Scheid march toward the sutler's store.

Chapter Two

Inside the commandant's office, Lt. Col. Ezra Beech, the commanding officer of Fort Grummond, stabbed with a poker at the gray and red coals in the pot-bellied stove in the corner of the office, trying to coax more heat from them. He sighed and leaned the poker against the wall. "Well, nothing for it," he mumbled. Reluctantly he grabbed the last chunk of firewood lying next to the stove and dropped it strategically on the coals. Firewood was scarce, and Beech tried to conserve it. But it was cold in his office.

He closed the iron door of the stove and straightened up. He hobbled to a window, relying on the cane he had been using for several weeks. He peered out the window at the misty scene. It was only November, and the long Dakota winter stretched ahead. Perhaps he could persuade the Army to ship some coal to the fort. Ah, but even though coal was cheap, shipping it to Fort Grummond was not.

There was a knock at the office door.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Scheid to see you, sir," a muffled, deferential voice called from the other side of the closed door.

Beech turned to look at the door. "Really?" What was the issue that compelled the Indian Agent to come himself? Ordinarily, messages were delivered by one of his employees. Could there be trouble with the Sioux on the reservation? Ever since the Meeker Massacre there had been heightened concern about a ripple effect. So far, there had been no sign that the uprising by the Utes in Colorado had induced the local Sioux to consider similar ill-advised actions. But maybe something had finally happened.

"Well, have Mr. Scheid come in, Sgt. Webster," Beech said. He made his way slowly to his desk but didn't sit down.

"Yes, sir."

Beech's office door opened, and the sergeant stood back and allowed the Indian agent to stride into the office. He closed the door after Scheid.

Orville Scheid was a tall, erect man, and his clothes hung loosely on a thin frame. He was holding his hat casually at his side, so his quite bald head was conspicuous.

"Mr. Scheid," Beech said. He held out a hand as the Indian agent reached the desk. Their dealings were usually rather formal; Beech could never bring himself to address the agent familiarly as Orville. And he got the impression that Scheid preferred it that way anyway.

Scheid shook Beech's hand. "Colonel," Scheid said.

Beech gestured with a hand toward one of the two captain chairs positioned in front of his desk. "Won't you take a seat, sir?"

Scheid said, "Thank you, sir." He nodded and sat down. He rested both feet on the floor and kept his hat in his lap.

Beech dropped awkwardly into his desk chair with a grunt.

"How's the gout, Colonel?"

Beech hooked his cane on the edge of the desktop. Using both hands he swung his right leg, foot bandaged, under the desk. "Terrible," he said. He studied Scheid's face and posture for just a moment. He detected no sense of anxiety in the agent's demeanor. "Well, Mr. Scheid, what brings you personally here so late on this frosty afternoon?" He smiled a little, for he could never stop wondering how an Indian would go about scalping the agent.

Scheid said, "First, Colonel, I've not come alone. My older daughter, Jeannie, is with me."

Beech smiled warmly. "Oh, very good, sir. Delighted." But then his smile vanished. "Oh, I pray she is not here for the attentions of our post doctor."

Scheid shook his head. "No, no, nothing like that. Her mother is quite skilled in such matters and can see to almost any medical issue herself."

"Of course," Beech said. He thought it was just as well. Fort Grummond's surgeon had done nothing to help his gout.

"But it does mean that we would like to impose upon your hospitality and spend the night at the fort."

"Of course," Beech said enthusiastically. "You can use the spare bedroom my wife and I have in our quarters, and I am sure all five of the wives of the married officers will fight over the opportunity to provide accommodations for your daughter."

"Thank you, sir."

"Indeed, I'm sure your daughter will be the center of attention of all the wives this evening."

Scheid smiled. "Well, her mother did want her to buy a few items at the sutler's store, but a chance for some congenial company of officers' wives was indeed Jeannie's primary motivation to accompany me this afternoon."

Beech nodded. "Your daughter is a fine, accomplished young lady, Mr. Scheid. All the officers' wives attest to that."

"Thank you, Colonel."

"And your wife, sir?" Beech asked. "I assume she is well?"

"Oh, yes," Scheid said. "She is home at the agency with Katie and Billy. She sends her compliments with Jeannie to the officers' wives."

There was another knock at the door.

Beech said, "Yes, Sergeant?"

"Sir, Maj. Prescott is here. He wants to know if you desire his presence."

"Oh, how convenient," Beech said. "Let him in."

The office door opened, and the sergeant stood back and allowed the major to step just inside the office and stop. Maj. Prescott was a solid, powerfully built man, and he seemed to fill the doorway.

"Sir," Prescott said, "I saw Mr. Scheid arrive, and I thought perhaps I might be of service."

Beech said, "Yes, well timed, Major." He waved a hand toward the other chair in front of his desk.

Prescott entered the room. Sgt. Webster closed the door after him.

The major set his big frame into the chair with grace. The chair squeaked at the strain.

Prescott nodded to the Indian agent. "Mr. Scheid," he said simply.

"Major," the Indian agent returned, without looking at the major.

Beech said, "So, Mr. Scheid, what is the issue? I don't get the sense that it is some sort of emergency."

"No emergency, Colonel," Scheid said. "Your word *issue* is a good way to describe the situation, less alarming than the word *emergency*. And employing the precise word needed is always important and effective. As is the issue itself."

"All right," Beech said, a bit impatiently.

"Dealing with the Sioux," Scheid said, "requires understanding, sympathy, tact, diplomacy, and kindness. But firmness, too."

Beech nodded casually, but he glanced at Prescott with a twinkle in his eye. The major had emitted a soft snort. They each had that here-we-go-again look. They had heard Scheid's speeches more frequently than they desired, and they would have agreed that the agent's statement was ironic, for they didn't think that the man possessed any of the qualities he'd just mentioned—except the last one.

Scheid said, "As soon as Columbus set foot in the New World, the fate of the aborigines of the continent was sealed. Their way of life doomed. Their way of life, their culture, their identity would inevitably be supplanted by that of the more advanced European, who found a continent rich in resources and underutilized by the first peoples, and ripe for exploitation and progress."

Beech said, "Uh-huh."

"The Indians have only two choices: assimilation or extinction."

"Those are stark choices, Mr. Scheid," Prescott said. "I don't think the

Sioux see the same two choices that you do."

Beech said, "Major, please don't interrupt." He looked at Prescott as if to say he wanted Scheid's speech over as quickly as possible.

"Yes, sir," Prescott said.

Scheid said, "Well, they will eventually, Maj. Prescott. And I advocate the first fate whereas the military favors the latter."

Beech said, "Now, that's not fair, Mr. Scheid."

Scheid waved a hand. "No matter. I withdraw my insinuation."

Beech said, "Please continue, Mr. Scheid."

"Well," Scheid said, "in order to civilize the Sioux, or any of our American aborigines, for that matter, you need to show them that you are their friend and teacher, not a jailkeeper."

"All right," Beech said. He could have recited the agent's speech for him.

"But there is a delicate balance between kindness on the one hand and weakness on the other."

"Yes."

"It is counterproductive to constantly humiliate the Sioux by having soldiers posted on the agency."

Beech frowned. "I have done my part, Mr. Scheid," Beech said. "I allow no soldiers on the agency proper without your consent. I'm sure you'll agree that that far exceeds War Department regulations."

"I do, Colonel," Scheid said. "And I am most grateful for your cooperation."

Beech added, "Even after Agent Meeker and his employees were killed by the Utes in Colorado. I offered to post a troop at the agency, but you declined it."

"Yes, I did," Scheid said. "I have nothing to fear from the Sioux on the Buffalo Creek Indian Reservation."

Prescott said, "Meeker said the same thing about the Utes on the White River Agency."

Scheid looked exasperated. "Well, I am not Nathan Meeker. Now, he was a generous man. But he was an impractical dreamer. He thought that by kindness and gentleness he could quickly bring the Utes to a fully assimilated state of being. But he was in too much of a hurry. He put up fences and plowed up land that the Utes wanted for pasturing their horses. They could not tolerate that. So they revolted."

Prescott said, "But aren't you also trying to convert the Sioux into farmers?"

"*Gradually*," Scheid emphasized. "Gradually. Yes, I've introduced

farming, but only on a small scale and involving mostly the women. They do take to it naturally. But I don't use plows or fences. And I let the men keep their horse culture. In contrast, I point out, to Nathan Meeker, who deliberately tried to extinguish the horse culture of the Utes."

Prescott said, "I thought you said their culture was doomed anyway."

Beech said, "Major, please."

Scheid said, "It is, eventually. But not this generation. It's the younger generations that can be assimilated, not the current generations."

Beech said, "Ah, the current generation is too fixed in its ways."

Scheid nodded. "Yes, that's it exactly." He looked at Prescott. "And may I point out to you that troops were of no help to Meeker?"

Prescott said, "I thought you'd bring that up."

"The Utes ambushed the first column of cavalry sent and defeated them."

Beech said, "The Utes are fierce antagonists and clever as well."

"So, Colonel," Scheid said, "you can see why I declined your offer of a troop of cavalry at the agency. Any security they would have provided was illusionary."

"You have a point there, Mr. Scheid," Beech allowed. "Is that why you're here? Have soldiers been at the agency?"

Scheid shook his head. "No. But I emphasize why I do not permit soldiers at the agency. You must not continually remind the Sioux of their fall from prominence," Scheid continued. "They are a proud people, and justifiably so. Continually reminding the Sioux that they are a conquered people would merely make them defensive, surly, and uncooperative. The exact opposite of what is needed to facilitate their assimilation into the American civilization."

"Excuse me, Mr. Scheid," Prescott said. "I thought the Sioux at this agency preferred to be called Lakota."

Scheid closed his eyes briefly. "It is merely a word, Major. The name doesn't matter. They are all simply Sioux to the United States government. I call them Sioux. They can call themselves whatever they want."

"I see," Prescott said. And therein, Prescott thought to himself, lay part of Scheid's problem with the local Indians.

"And yet," Scheid said, raising a finger, "the Sioux must be made to realize that their nomadic, warrior existence is over. They must be made to realize what their true relationship to the white man is from now on."

"Gradually," Prescott said.

"Yes, gradually," Scheid said.

"Ah," said Beech. "Maybe I'm beginning to see your problem."

"Probably not, Colonel," Scheid said. "Now, occasionally it must be

demonstrated to them that they are wards of the United States government now and that as an agent of that government I—must—be—obeyed." Scheid emphasized the latter phrase by pounding a fist into the opposite palm with each of the last words.

"So you want a show of force?" Beech asked.

Scheid grimaced, then sighed deeply. "Well, not so much a show of force as a demonstration of authority, of preeminence."

Prescott said, "What's the difference?"

Scheid ignored him. "A demonstration of the superiority and magnificence of the white American civilization. In order for the Sioux to become part of that civilization—"

Prescott said, "They don't want to become part of it."

"Maj. Prescott," Scheid said patiently. "Their only other choice is your preference of annihilation."

"Mr. Scheid," Beech said sternly.

Scheid went on. "Sooner or later they will recognize the manifest advantages of the white man's culture."

Prescott said, "In a couple of generations, huh?"

Scheid scowled at him. "No, it won't take that long."

Beech said, "Maj. Prescott, I warned you."

"Yes, sir."

Beech turned back to Scheid. "So, what are you saying, Mr. Scheid? They disobeyed you in some way?"

"Yes, well, in order for the Sioux to be able to interact properly with the white man, they must learn to speak English."

Beech looked puzzled. "Some of them already do. Chief Stone Bear, for example, does quite well, doesn't he?"

"I wouldn't say that exactly, Colonel," Scheid said. "But, yes, he does speak English to a useful extent. But there are very few who do," Scheid said. "Their proficiency is poor."

Prescott asked, "Can't you just use interpreters like Milo Ackerman, Mr. Scheid? Or you learn *their* language?"

"I will not learn their language," Scheid said forcefully.

Beech said, "But your wife and daughter have learned some of their language. I know they have. Which is quite an achievement, seeing how difficult the Sioux language is."

It was obviously a sore point with Scheid. "I've asked them not to use the language, but Cynthia and Jeannie are—are—"

"Stubborn?" Prescott suggested.

Beech scowled at the major. "Major."

"Sir."

Scheid said, "Their culture is defeated, dying, and their language must be extinguished. Gradually. By discouraging its use and allowing it to simply vanish. I make it a point," he emphasized, "not to use any words of theirs I might inadvertently pick up."

"Doesn't all that make communication difficult?" Prescott asked.

"Yes," Scheid said, "and the more difficulty the better. That way they will more quickly see the advantage of learning English as soon as possible."

Beech looked puzzled. "But your wife and daughter are already teaching the Sioux children English now, aren't they?"

"That must be difficult," Prescott commented.

"Not really, Maj. Prescott," Scheid said. "All children learn quickly."

"Then what's the problem?" Beech asked.

"The problem, gentlemen, is Stone Bear."

"Stone Bear is a problem?" Prescott said. "That toothless, wrinkled-up, old buzzard is a problem?"

Scheid sighed. "Major, you would be wise not to measure a book by its cover."

"What?"

"Old Chief Stone Bear may not be in the prime of life, Major, but he has—unfortunately—great influence in the Sioux camps."

Prescott said, "Derived mainly from his effectiveness in murdering white men, women, and children for many years."

"It wasn't murder," Scheid snapped. "It was war. And, yes, there were atrocities, on both sides, Major. But the wars are over. The Sioux have made peace now."

"That's debatable," Prescott sniffed.

"Mr. Scheid, just what did Stone Bear do?" Beech asked.

"He told all the camps that the children should not learn English. He ordered all the children out of the agency school."

"Did they leave?"

"Yes. All of them. Instantly."

"Well," Prescott grunted. "That tough old goat."

Beech himself had a smirk on his face. "Well, uh—"

Scheid said, "This is not humorous, gentlemen. Stone Bear's edict is a serious impediment to the children's education and my program of eventual advancement of the Sioux people."

Beech cleared his throat. "So, Mr. Scheid, you want me to send troops to

force Stone Bear to order the children back to school. Is that it?"

Scheid squirmed a bit. "No, not *force* him exactly, Colonel. *Persuade* is a better word. Maybe even *encourage*. I'm looking for the perfect word."

"Persuade," Beech repeated, skeptically.

"Yes," Scheid said. "Impress upon Chief Stone Bear the ultimate futility of his resistance to my efforts to assimilate the Sioux into the white man's culture. I think a single company of cavalry would suffice."

Beech said, "At Fort Grummond that may be less than 50 men, Mr. Scheid. No company at the fort has anywhere near a full complement."

Prescott said, "A single troop won't impress the Sioux; it will only insult them. These are the people who decimated Custer's entire regiment at the Little Big Horn. Thornburgh had over 150 men at the Milk River when the Utes killed him and a dozen of his men."

"Major," Scheid said patiently. "You needn't be concerned. My Sioux are quite peaceful."

"They're all farmers now, right?" Prescott said.

"Not farmers, actually," Scheid said. "I like to think I am turning them into ranchers. But, as a matter of fact, I think the small harvest we had this past fall showed real promise."

"I heard it was abysmal," Prescott countered. "This is terrible farmland; it's buffalo country, cattle country. At least you make some sense wanting to turn them into ranchers rather than farmers."

"Thank you for even that small concession, Major," Scheid said. "We'll do better next year. Meanwhile we shall continue to provide generous subsidies."

"Generous?" Prescott asked. He gave a snort.

Beech scowled at Prescott yet again.

Scheid said, "Yes. Another contrast between me and Nathan Meeker. His distribution of subsidies left much to be desired, though that was more Washington's fault than his. And I also allow my charges to hunt off the reservation. Meeker didn't."

"You mean *raid* off the reservation, don't you?" Prescott said.

"Major!" Beech snapped.

Scheid shook his head slowly and gave a sigh of hopelessness. "Colonel, I fear to most of the military all Indians are hostile."

Beech shook his head quickly. "No, certainly not."

"It's a safe way to operate," Prescott said.

"But wrong," Scheid said, jerking his head around to glare at Prescott. Then he crossed his legs and leaned back in the chair, touching his fingertips

together. “I freely admit that there are some troublemakers on some of the other reservations who—”

“Other reservations?” Prescott asked.

“Yes, Major, on other reservations,” Scheid repeated. “You’ll not find any of *my* Indians making trouble.”

“Bah,” Prescott said. “Just because we can’t find ‘em making mischief doesn’t mean they aren’t doing it.”

“Major,” Beech snapped once more. He rapped his knuckles on his desk.

Prescott crossed his arms defiantly. “Sir,” he said.

“Thank you, Colonel,” Scheid said. “But that was unnecessary. I realize that the major and I have radically different views on the Sioux. Thank God it is you, with your more enlightened attitude, who is in command here and not him.”

“Hm,” was all that Beech said.

Prescott looked at Beech as if looking over a pair of reading glasses. He grinned and raised his eyebrows.

Beech cleared his throat.

Scheid went on. “Now, the camps are scattered all along Buffalo Creek. I wish to visit only Stone Bear’s camp. One troop will be sufficient to impress one Indian.”

“It won’t work,” Prescott muttered.

Beech said, “All right, Mr. Scheid. I will have one troop accompany you to the agency tomorrow morning. When did you wish to leave?”

Scheid said, “I know the Army likes to set out at dawn, but I believe my daughter will prefer to tarry a bit longer than that.”

Beech smiled. “I fully understand your indulgence, sir. Shall we say ten o’clock?”

Scheid nodded. “That will be satisfactory, Colonel. We should be able to visit Stone Bear in the late afternoon tomorrow.”

Beech smiled. “Very well.”

Scheid said, “And tomorrow night I can offer you and the officers in the troop accommodations for the night in my agency buildings.”

Beech glanced down at his foot. “Unfortunately, my present affliction prevents me from riding a horse.”

“Ah, of course.”

“Maj. Prescott will be in command of the detachment.”

Scheid stiffened. “Is that necessary? Doesn’t the company have its own commander?”

“Yes, but I believe a mission of this importance requires that the most

senior officer available at the fort be in command, which is Maj. Prescott. It will be more impressive to have a senior officer at the head of the column."

Scheid looked at Prescott, displeasure in his countenance even if his words had not conveyed the same reaction. "I suppose that is a point, Colonel."

Prescott simply smiled at Scheid. "What about the troopers, Mr. Scheid. Can you shelter them, too?"

Scheid said, "A few sergeants perhaps, but I fear your rank and file will have to make do with the ground. But in anticipation of that, I have gathered an ample supply of firewood for their comfort."

"Thank you, Mr. Scheid."

Scheid rose slowly to his feet, and the two Army officers rose, too, though Beech took a lot of effort to do so. Scheid raised a finger. "Oh, I'll need Mr. Ackerman to come along," Scheid said.

"What for?" Beech asked. "Stone Bear speaks enough English, right?"

Scheid's jaw muscles tightened. "Yes, but he refuses to use it now."

Prescott snickered and Beech tried to suppress a quick smile.

"It is not humorous, Major," Scheid snapped.

"You shall have Ackerman, Mr. Scheid," Beech promised.

Scheid said, "Thank you, Colonel." He started toward the door. "I will find Jeannie, see what plans she has made with the ladies of the fort for this evening."

"Very well," Beech said. "And we'll see you for dinner this evening? Say, 7:00 pm?"

"Yes," Scheid said cheerfully. "That would be most welcome."

"Fine, then. Maj. Prescott, I think your company at the dinner would also be appropriate."

The shoulders of both Scheid and Prescott sagged.

Prescott said, "Very good, sir."

Scheid said, "I suppose." He bowed a bit. "Colonel."

"Mr. Scheid."

Scheid left the office briskly and closed the door behind himself.

The two officers listened until the clump of Scheid's shoes ceased.

Beech turned to Prescott angrily. "Nels," he said, "you must stop badgering Scheid about his Indians." He dropped back into his chair and grimaced.

"Sorry, Ezra," Prescott said. He sat back down. "I just can't stand that pious nincompoop and his preaching about his innocent Indians. You know as well as I do, they go raiding off the reservation during the summer and fall

and only come back to winter over on government food and warm Army blankets."

"Which Scheid hands out stingily, too, despite his claims of generosity" Beech added. "But he *is* the agent on this reservation, Nels."

"The reservations should be under the sole jurisdiction of the Army. Putting civilians out here to administer these treaties only ensures eventual trouble."

"But you have to admit that there's been no trouble on the Buffalo Creek Reservation," Beech pointed out. "Almost none."

"They make their trouble elsewhere. Why, you can see the results of their depredations when you go to their camps."

"Circumstantial evidence, Nels."

"Bah."

Beech drummed the fingers of one hand on his desk. Then he casually tapped the silver oak leaf on one of his shoulder straps. "You see this?"

Prescott straightened up. "Yes, sir."

"Now, Nels, I'm not pulling rank on you. That's not my point."

"It's not?"

"We've been friends a long time, ever since we fought Robert E. Lee together in Virginia. Well, I had two stars on those straps then. Major general."

"I had eagles myself," Prescott said wistfully. "Colonel of my own regiment."

"Yes. But hardly anyone kept his Civil War rank after the war. Even Custer dropped from major general of volunteers to lieutenant colonel in the regular Army."

Prescott sighed. "I went from a first lieutenant of regulars at the beginning of the war to colonel by the end of the war and back down to captain in the regular cavalry after the war."

"You were lucky it wasn't all the way back down to first lieutenant."

Prescott nodded. "Yeah."

"Nels, I want to be a general again, just as you would like to be a colonel again."

"Promotions are glacial in the peacetime Army," Prescott said. "It took me eleven goddamn years to make major in this regiment, Ezra. And I've only got three years in that grade now. How many years before I make it to even lieutenant colonel, much less colonel again? Will I live that long?"

"You'll never make it, Nels, if you keep shooting your mouth off." Beech leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk. "Look, during the war with

the South there was ample opportunity for promotion. A rapidly expanding Army and one battle after another in which an officer could display his initiative, his skill, and his courage. And horrific casualties meant there were always more advanced slots to fill."

"Yeah."

"Where is that opportunity now, out here? There's no glory in fighting Indians. Only Custer's kind. Or Thornburgh's."

"No, thanks," Prescott said, raising a hand. He had to smile.

"The battles out here aren't like the ones back in the Civil War. Out here there are no massed bodies of troops, no bands playing, no flags waving, no chivalry. Out here it's sneaky and dirty and cruel and vicious and to the death. And when you do get into a fight, women and children are invariably killed and then you're blasted from pulpit and press. No. There's no glory in fighting Indians."

Prescott frowned. "What exactly is your point, Ezra? How does this discussion fit in with the one troop I'm supposed to take with Scheid?"

"My point is that even the Sioux wars are over now. All we got left is insignificant police actions, like rounding up the Utes in Colorado. Small, grubby, monotonous, hard, and dangerous. And of no importance to anyone, except to the troopers who get killed. And maybe to a few settlers and the railroad."

Prescott nodded. "Yeah, it's not promising."

"So, Nels, you have to keep your nose clean. Promotions won't come from what you do but they can be *lost* by what you do. So, not a single disapproving letter in your file. The slightest note of criticism, the tiniest hint of complaint from anyone, even from someone like Scheid, and your promotion is doomed."

Prescott nodded. "You're right, of course, Ezra. But I just find it so hard to listen to that jackass."

"But, Nels, that's exactly the kind of thing you are going to be judged on. How well you can listen to the man without provoking him. How well you cooperate with him. Tact and diplomacy and cooperation are now far more important than courage and battlefield leadership. Do you see that?"

"But, Ezra, Scheid treats *all* the Sioux like children, not just the actual children. He humiliates them. Reasoning with them, rewards, punishments, slaps on the wrists, coaxing, lecturing. Bah. The Sioux aren't farmers; they're warriors. They laugh at him behind his back. And there's only one language *warriors* understand. Cold steel. That's what. I'd treat them like men, with respect. You lost. That's the way it is. So you have to do as we say. None of

this go-stand-in-the-corner school-boy stuff that Scheid dishes out."

"Nels, you're a stubborn man. Just watch it or you'll be a major the rest of your Army career."

"Well, thanks for the advice, Ezra."

"There's more," Beech said. And for this he got painfully to his feet.

Prescott was surprised at Beech's action. He knew how much the colonel's gout hurt him. He rose quickly to his feet. "Yes?"

"Maj. Prescott," Beech said.

Prescott noted the change to formality. "Yes, sir?"

Beech clasped his hands behind his back. "Major, I don't care if you want to throw your career away, but I'm not going to let you throw away *my* career, too. And I am going to be judged on how well I can control my subordinates, how well I get them to perform. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir," Prescott said.

"Therefore, you will cooperate fully with Scheid, no matter how asinine you consider his ideas. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know it won't be easy, Major. You'll need the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job. But you must try, because if I get any complaints from Scheid about you, I'm going to come down hard on you. Is that clear, Major?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

"All right, sir, I'll take Gordon's H Troop. It's the largest troop."

"No, take B Troop," Beech said.

"But Captain Reynolds is sick. Lt. Templeton would be in command, and he's only been out here a few months."

"I know, but that dandy'll put on a good show all by himself. And that's what we need—a show, a spectacle. So, boots polished, sabers, the works."

"Even sabers?"

"Yes. Where's Ackerman?"

"Probably passed out under a table in the bar at the post sutler's."

"Find him and sober him up. Take him along."

"Yes, sir."

"Take three days rations with you, just in case there's a delay. Each man to take twelve pounds of forage for his horse with him. Skip the forage wagon. This is just a parade, not a patrol."

"Yes, sir."

"Any questions, Major?"

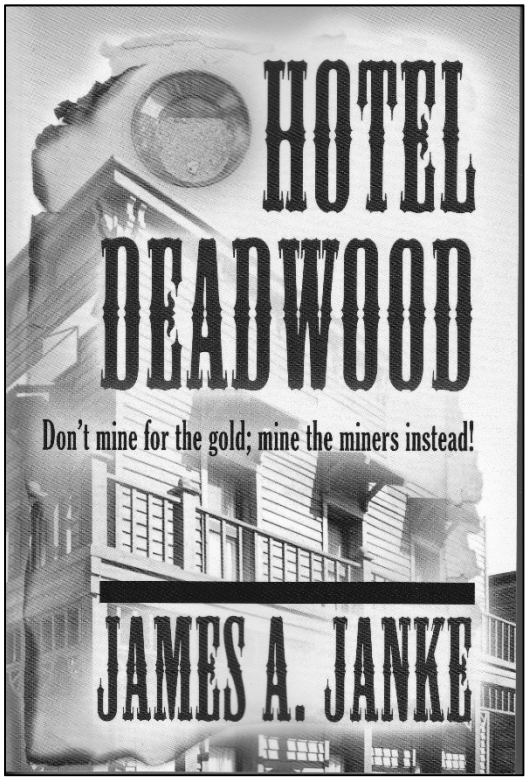
"No, sir."

About the Author

Jim Janke is fascinated by 19th Century American history, especially the West and the Civil War. He has an extensive library on both subjects. He regularly visits Civil War battlefields and museums in the East and travels frequently throughout the West, finding inspiration and authenticity for his absorbing novels.

http://jimjanke.com

Hotel Deadwood
is another Western of mine I think you would enjoy.



Owen Buchanan, along with his brother, Philo, his cousin, Willis, and a neighbor, Lucas, leave farming behind and rush west, enticed by the news of gold in the Black Hills. It's a long walk with a bull train from Fort Pierre on the Missouri River to Deadwood. Near the end they rescue Dr. Hiram Gruenhagen, his wife Willemina, and their beautiful daughter Josephine from the Sioux.

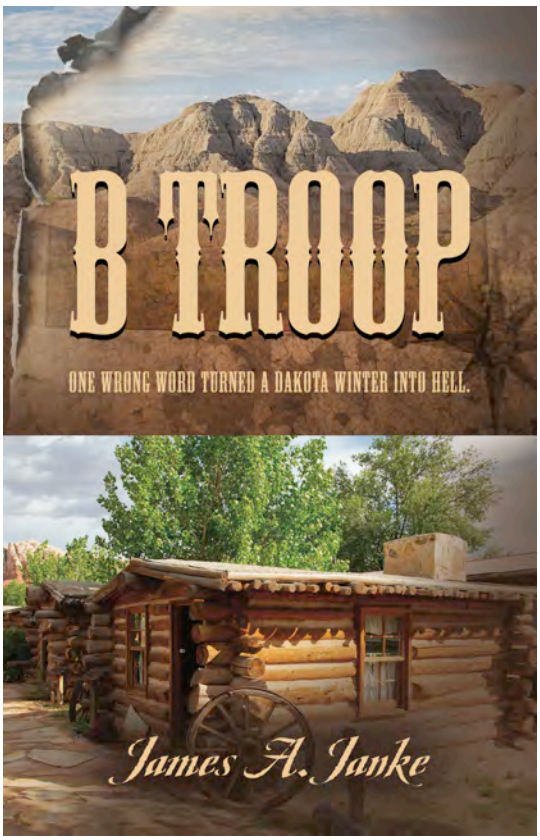
Owen and his companions join Everett Miller, Lucas's uncle, on his placer mining claim. Everett is their guide to bold, bustling Deadwood at the height of its wild, giddy, boomtown days in July 1876, when the

only law was the pistol a man carried. They meet Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane and others, including the notorious Stark brothers and their outlaw gang.

Owen soon realizes that mining the miners is a faster, easier path to wealth than mining itself. He and Philo quickly establish the primitive Hotel Deadwood and bill it as the cheapest hotel in town.

And, of course, they compete for the affections of alluring Josephine.

But the Buchanans clash with the Starks, which leads to deadly violence. And maybe this story tells the real reason Jack McCall shot Bill Hickok.



Corporal John Taylor, one of "Custer's avengers," is bored and lonely. But his life and that of B Troop explodes in violence and tragedy when a single ill-chosen word by the local Indian agent sends a reservation's Sioux people on a desperate dash for Canada during a brutal Dakota winter, relentlessly pursued by a determined cavalry column.

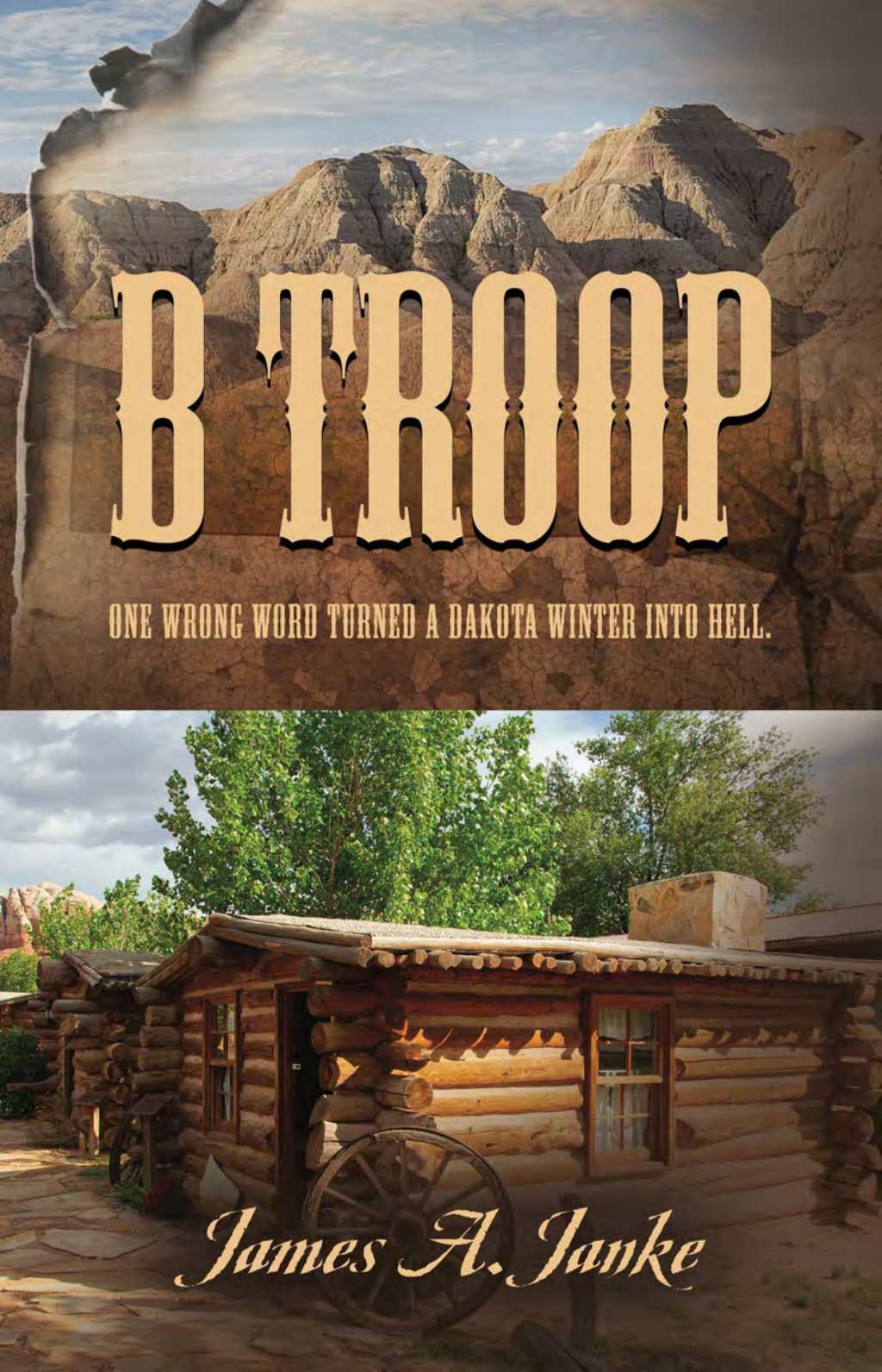
B Troop:
One wrong word turned a Dakota winter into hell.

By James A. Janke

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11196.html?s=pdf

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.


B TROOP
ONE WRONG WORD TURNED A DAKOTA WINTER INTO HELL.
James A. Janke

BOOKS BY JAMES A. JANKE

WESTERNS

Jeremiah Bacon

Canyon Treasure

A Tin Star for Braddock

Blood on the Wind River Mountains

Last Boat to Fort Benton

Winter Kill

Last Stage to Laramie

Ten Percent to Tombstone

Hotel Deadwood

Oro Diablo

B Troop

GAVIN MACKENZIE
CIVIL WAR NAVAL ADVENTURES

The Carolinas

Duel at Hampton Roads

Print ISBN: 978-1-64718-869-6
Epub ISBN: 978-1-64718-870-2
Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64718-871-9

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

Printed on acid-free paper

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

Chapter One

Fort Grummond
Dakota Territory
November 1879

John Taylor, Corporal, United States Cavalry, used his wooden bucket to smash through the thin crust of ice on the creek behind the stables.

"Hey!" the trooper kneeling next to Taylor blurted. He wiped drops of frigid water from his face. "That water's freezin', Johnny." He had been scooping up water into his own bucket.

Taylor chuckled. "Sorry, Hugo," he said. He plunged his bucket into the creek and filled it half full.

Hugo Schuster stood up with his bucket. "Pretty soon we'll need an axe to break through the ice." He sighed. "Another damn Dakota winter comin'."

"Yeah," Taylor said. "Too bad the horses don't want hot coffee in the afternoon instead of water."

Schuster laughed. "That'd be welcome."

Taylor stood up too. He started back up the path toward the stables.

Schuster fell in beside him. "At least there's no snow yet this year. At least none that stayed."

"No," Taylor said. There had been snow in late October, but it had melted.

They stepped around a few other troopers coming down the path with buckets of their own.

"You done readin' that book yet, Johnny?" Schuster asked.

"*Around the World in Eighty Days*?" Taylor asked. "Gees, Hugo, I just started it."

"I thought you was readin' *Tom Sawyer*."

"Finished that one two days ago," Taylor said.

"Well, hell, who's got it now? I didn't see it on the troop shelf."

Taylor shrugged. "Don't know. You've got to be quicker, Hugo."

"Oh, well," Schuster said. "Not like I haven't read it before."

Taylor grinned. "Yeah. A common problem. How about *Moby Dick*? I'm pretty sure that's still on the shelf."

"Oh, I dunno," Schuster said.

"It's a whale of a read," Taylor said.

Schuster smirked and rolled his eyes. "Johnny, that joke is so old, it

smells like a dead fish."

"Sorry," Taylor said. But he was grinning.

Schuster sighed. "Wish the troop fund weren't so short o' cash. So we could buy some *new* books. I'm dyin' for somethin' new to read."

"Come payday, I'll join you again in making that our top priority suggestion at the troop meeting."

"Okay, Johnny. But payday's a long way off. It's not exactly regular anyway."

"No," Taylor said. "Good point."

"And I think many of the other boys will go for more newspaper subscriptions again."

"Yeah, probably."

"You suppose you could ask your folks back in Minnesota for an early Christmas present of some books? Like they sent last year?"

"Sure, I'll ask," Taylor said. He stopped and turned to the side and looked out onto the prairie. He rested a fist on his hip.

Schuster stopped. "Johnny?"

"You made me think of home, Hugo."

"A long way off, Johnny," Schuster said.

"A long way off," Taylor repeated. "In miles and days."

"Yeah," Schuster said. "I know the feelin' myself." He waited. But Taylor kept staring into the distance. "Well, don't be dreamin' too long," Schuster said. "Reiter'll be on your ass."

"No, I won't," Taylor said. He didn't want to invite the displeasure of B Troop's 1st Sgt. Thomas Reiter.

Schuster resumed his walk toward the stables. But Taylor continued to stare out onto the distant prairie. The view was not unattractive to him, bleak though the aspect was. The day was cold, but windless. Also sunless and misty. The air was a translucent, crystalline white, and every stalk of withered, yellow grass had a glaze of hoarfrost on it. The whole panorama had a stark, eerie beauty to it.

He didn't bother to look in any other direction, for Fort Grummond floated in a sea of grass, and the view in one direction was the same as in any other direction. Every mile between the fort and the Missouri River way to the east—or way, way to the north—consisted of the same gently-rolling, treeless prairie. So different from Minnesota and its rich farmlands, lakes, and forests.

Sound carried easily in the still air. Taylor could distinctly hear the troopers grooming their horses in the stables nearby. He could hear troopers' boots crunch the frozen grass as the men headed for the stream for water. And

he could hear the snuffling of contented horses, a sound that always pleased Taylor.

There were no palisades to block his view, for the fort had been constructed on the premise that troopers should depend on alertness and carbines for protection rather than on walls. The fort was named in honor of Lt. George W. Grummond, who had been killed by Indians in the so-called Fetterman Massacre at Fort Phil Kearny in 1866. But even in that infamous fight, the Indians hadn't attacked the fort directly.

Fort Grummond was a relatively small post, not like bustling, sprawling establishments like Fort Laramie. This garrison consisted of only three cavalry troops—B, C, and H—of its regiment and a solitary infantry company, D, of a different regiment. Taylor had been surprised when he first heard of infantry companies being posted on the Western frontier. How could infantry keep up with cavalry or advance against Indians mounted on horses? But long campaigns were hard on horses. Soldiers in this infantry company were happy to point out to the troopers that on a long expedition, marching soldiers would outlast horses, and all the cavalrymen would be afoot eventually anyway. "And then we eat the horses." That was always followed by scornful laughter.

Nominally, there should have been about 400 officers and men at Fort Grummond, but every unit was well below allotted strength. In fact, there were fewer than 200 troopers and infantrymen at the fort.

The fort had been established partly to protect travelers and the very few settlers in the area from the depredations of Indians, but principally it was to act as an enforcing presence for the Buffalo Creek Indian Agency. The reservation and the agency lay about 20 miles to the west of the fort, and they were under the direction of an Indian Agent, Orville Scheid.

But the reservation and, indeed, the area in general was quiet. To be sure, the Sioux were embittered and sullen, understandably so, but they were also pragmatic. Hence, they were quiet. Very quiet. Scheid rarely called upon the garrison for assistance in any capacity.

And that was the constant and growing complaint that gnawed at Taylor: *He was bored*.

Oh, it had been different in the beginning. Taylor was one of "Custer's Avengers." He had enlisted in July 1876, a month after Custer's disastrous defeat on the Little Big Horn. But Taylor had not really been out for hot-blooded revenge; he had signed up for the sheer excitement of the prospect, a chance to get off the family farm and see the elephant. Custer had merely been a pretext.

Taylor had grown up listening to his father's tales of the Civil War—the campaigning, the camaraderie, the battles, and the blood. He had often heard his father relate in hushed tones how he had miraculously survived the 1st Minnesota's charge on the second day at Gettysburg; the regiment had 85% casualties in the eight companies who had made the charge. His father would shake his head and say what a terrible thing the war was. But—God forgive him—he would also allow that the war had been the most exciting time in his whole life. For Taylor's father nothing that came before or after the Civil War came close to reaching the stirring intensity of the war.

So, when Custer met his match at the Little Big Horn, Taylor had seized the opportunity. He loved horses, so cavalry was a natural for him anyway. And he wanted to see the West, to see Indians, to fight in a battle. He had visions of sabers clanking, bugles blowing, the US cavalry swooping down in holy vengeance upon the Sioux and the Cheyenne, and all the soldiers basking in honored heroes' glory. The adventure of a lifetime.

And at first it *was* exciting, or at least stimulating. Well, his initial training post at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, had been rather disillusioning. Poor rations, insufferable sergeants, pompous officers. And the only real training he remembered was policing the grounds and doing odd jobs for the officers. There was no adventure in any of it.

However, at the time he had thought that Jefferson Barracks was just a temporary aberration. He thought that once out on the frontier he would have his battles and his adventure.

On the frontier it was all new. Far away from home for the first time, in a completely different environment, different culture. Farm boys grew up rough and tough, so Taylor was good with his fists, and he had risen steadily up the pecking order in the troop. He was an excellent rider. And he had started hunting when his rifle was longer than he was tall, so he was a much better marksman than almost all the other troopers, many of whom came from cities and had never fired a weapon before. And officers had picked him out as someone with a natural leadership ability. He had made corporal fairly quickly.

But there had been no battles, no blood, no heart-pounding kill-or-be-killed excitement. He seldom even saw an Indian. It turned out that Custer's defeat had been the last gasp of the Sioux and the Cheyenne. Never again did the Indians concentrate in such overwhelming numbers. There were fights with the Indians after that, but they were small and scattered and far away from Taylor. The Sioux had virtually all surrendered long before he had even reached Dakota Territory. And although the training at Fort Grummond had

been more purposeful than had been that at Jefferson Barracks, there had never been an occasion to use it.

Even when Sitting Bull had come down from his self-imposed exile in Canada the past summer to raid, the chief had skittered back across the international border before General Miles from Fort Keogh on the Yellowstone had gotten within fifty miles of him. And Fort Grummond was stuck near an agency that never had the slightest bit of trouble from the Sioux.

Taylor didn't know whether to attribute that calm to the Indian Agent for being good at his job or to the Indians for being clever. For "everyone" in the Army was sure that agency Indians went raiding every summer off the reservations. They were just very careful not to start any trouble on or near the reservations themselves.

So, no battles, no glory, no adventure. But there *was* routine, mind-numbing routine. Regimentation, harsh discipline, poor and infrequent pay, bland and inadequate food, drill, and fatigue duty—meaning manual labor, like digging ditches and constructing buildings. A trooper's day was controlled by the bugle. An enormous gulf existed between enlisted men and officers, and sergeants could be bullies. Entertainment was sparse, healthcare was incompetent, leaves almost nonexistent, towns too far away.

And civilian society in general had a low opinion of, even disdain for the post-Civil War volunteer regular Army. Nothing like the acclaim and appreciation and respect heaped on his father as a Civil War soldier and veteran. Taylor was grateful, though, that at least his parents were proud of his enlisting.

Taylor hadn't given much thought to just how long a five-year enlistment really was when he signed on the dotted line. He wasn't homesick; he was just sick of the Army. *Bored*. A helluva a way to spend the best years of his youth, wasted. How come enlistments couldn't have been for two years instead of five?

"Corp. Taylor!" a man boomed from the stables. That was Sergeant Douglas Davis. The troopers called him Dee Dee—but not to his face. "What the hell you starin' at?"

Taylor flinched. "Nothing, Sergeant." He turned quickly and hustled back toward the stables. The stables at Fort Grummond were more like long, flimsy sheds open on one side. Sort of nothing more than covered picket lines.

"Get your ass back here and tend to your animal!"

"Yes, Sergeant," Taylor said.

Taylor reached B Troop's stable and went down the rear of the line of horses, toward where his set of four—Sean O'Dea, himself, Linus Skinner,

and Hans Klausmeyer—had their stalls, in that order. There were no walls between stalls. Stalls were just spots along the side of the building to which each horse was tethered.

Each horse along the way had a trooper busily grooming his mount. Curry combs and brushes clicked. A horse or two snorted.

Taylor nodded to a few of the men or greeted some casually. Some of the men talked quietly among themselves, but Reiter frowned on too much visiting. "Stay on task, troopers!"

Taylor set the bucket of water down in front of his horse and removed the nosebag from the animal. "Drink up, Austin," he said. Taylor didn't live near the town of Austin; he just liked the name. But the name did confuse people:

"Taylor, you don't sound like a Texan."

"That's Austin, Minnesota, not Austin, Texas."

Reiter had scoffed at his wanting to name his mount after a city. But the rules said a trooper could name his horse, and rules were rules in the Army. And Taylor had squelched Reiter's complaint entirely when Taylor pointed out that Gen. Grant's favorite horse was named Cincinnati.

Austin snuffled contentedly and lowered his muzzle down to the water.

Taylor stroked the horse's neck fondly. Then he ran a hand over the animal's broad back. A horse was a magnificent animal.

Taylor turned the nosebag upside down, tapped on its bottom once to knock out any remaining grain, and then hung the bag on a hook on the wall.

Taylor picked up his brush and began the twice daily routine of brushing his mount. He started on the off side—the right side—of Austin's head and face, brushing and cleaning carefully, especially around the eyes, and paying close attention to any dust about the roots of the horse's ears. He used the curry comb frequently to remove accumulated hair from the brush.

He threw Austin's mane over to the near side—the left side—and brushed down his neck. Then he moved to the horse's muscular shoulder.

He enjoyed brushing down Austin as much as the horse enjoyed being brushed. The brushing facilitated the bond formed between horse and trooper. And Taylor never got bored of caring for his horse.

Taylor took pride in Austin being about the strongest, biggest, hardiest mount in the garrison, second only to the horse of Maj. Nelson Prescott, the fort's second-in-command. And to Taylor's mind Austin was one of the best-looking horses as well. At least of those horses assigned to enlisted men. The best-looking horse in the troop belonged to 2nd Lt. Joshua Templeton, B Troop's second in command. His horse was a beautiful and expensive black mount he called Xerxes. He had brought the animal with him from out East.

Taylor brushed Austin's breast, belly, flank, loins, back and legs. He finished the off side with a wisp of hay, slightly dampened from any remaining water in the bucket. He moved around to the near side and started brushing Austin down from that side, starting at the horse's head again.

Reiter stopped at Taylor's stall. "Corp. Taylor," he said.

Taylor turned to face the noncommissioned officer, who was standing with his hands clasped behind his back. "Yes, Sergeant?" He feared Reiter was going to assign him extra duty for his slacking off earlier to ponder the frozen prairie.

But Reiter said, "Corp. Sands is ill. You're corporal of the guard again tonight. So your set of four is on guard duty again."

Taylor's shoulders slumped. Guard duty was very boring duty in a military life of boredom. "Again, already, Sergeant?" He tried not to sound as if he were complaining, but simply curious or puzzled. But it did sound like he was whining.

Reiter raised his eyebrows and stared at Taylor for a few seconds. "How long have you been in this man's Army, Corporal?"

Reiter always asked that question to tell a man that complaining or even asking for a rationale was futile. And *arguing* would have been almost fatal. The 1st sergeant seemed to think he was being clever. The company sergeants, Louis Baker and Davis, would simply have snapped the trooper's head off. Taylor would have said nothing to either of those men. But Reiter knew the power he had in the troop, and he knew the troopers knew it, too, so he didn't have to be touchy about it.

Taylor said, "Three years, four months, and a few days, Sergeant."

"So-o-o?" Reiter asked in a drawl.

"So I have duty tonight as corporal of the guard. Thank you, Sergeant."

Reiter nodded and moved off.

Taylor sighed. "Damn," he muttered. He went back to stroking Austin's neck, giving the chore some extra energy. The horse looked at him. "Oh, sorry, Austin," Taylor said. "Got a little rough there, huh?"

Suddenly he stopped. He glanced up at Pvt. Linus Skinner, who had turned around from his own mount and was staring at Taylor over Austin's back. He held a brush in one hand and the curry comb in the other hand.

Taylor didn't like Skinner. He didn't like his slovenly, unkempt habits, his disheveled appearance in a profession not known for sartorial high standards anyway. He didn't like Skinner's round, ugly, fat face, his bitter lack of humor, his sour disposition, or his contempt for everything and everybody. Taylor wondered what terrible wrong he had done to have God

punish him by getting Skinner assigned to his set of four.

At least Skinner wasn't his bunkie, a man he would have to share a two-man dog tent with occasionally or pair up with in a battle. Sean O'Dea was Taylor's bunkie. Hans Klausmeyer had the misfortune to be Skinner's bunkie.

Though Klausmeyer didn't seem to mind that arrangement. But then, nothing seemed to faze the chunky German. He was stolid and unperturbable. He was a good deal older than Taylor, and he had served in the Prussian army and had fought in pitched battles in Europe as well as skirmishes. He told fascinating tales of his experience in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and how he had marched into Paris after the French had lost a war they had been foolish enough to start themselves. Paris and France and Prussia. They all seemed so exotic to a young man from Minnesota who hadn't left the state until he had enlisted in the Army.

Klausmeyer, like O'Dea, too, was a recent immigrant. Many recruits were immigrants. And with all his military experience, Klausmeyer found that the United States Army was delighted to have him. He was the only man in the troop who was a better marksman than Taylor. The two best shots in the troop being in his set of four meant they were always the first set behind the commanding officer on the march. The officer wanted his best marksmen where they were handiest to him.

And Klausmeyer, like many immigrants who didn't speak English, found the Army a good place to learn the language. He always carried a small pocket dictionary. And he regularly bought newspapers for himself at the sutler's store and carried those around too, until they completely fell apart from constant folding.

Taylor asked, "What do you want, Skinner?"

"I heard that," Skinner said quietly, almost in a whisper.

All the men on the line talked quietly when Reiter was prowling the stables, so Taylor was not surprised at Skinner's conspiratorial tone.

"Heard what?"

"I heard you swear, Taylor," Skinner said.

Taylor smirked. "And you don't?"

"Hell, the only thing that gets you mad enough to swear is the goddamned Army."

Taylor snorted. Skinner was probably half-right about that. He did tend to lag far behind other troopers in the use of profanity. He considered it an exercise in self-control, and he liked to be in control. Which was ironic, given that he was in the Army, which had complete control over his body and life. But not his mind—yet. And maybe not his soul.

Taylor said, "Get back to your grooming, Private." He started brushing Austin's neck and shoulder.

Skinner said, "You bein' corporal of the guard tonight would make it damned easy for you to separate yourself from the Army tonight. Take the grand bounce."

Taylor shuddered. He looked both ways furtively. Reiter was all the way at the other end of the stables. Other troopers down the line weren't reacting.

Taylor snapped his head around and leaned toward Skinner. "Are you crazy?" he hissed. "Saying something like that out here?"

"Aw, shit," Skinner scoffed. He blew his nose into the straw and then wiped a sleeve across his face. "Reiter can't hear us, and nobody else would care anyway. With our set of four on guard duty tonight again, we get another perfect chance. We could all leave together."

Taylor snapped, "I told you I'm not interested. Get back to your horse." He started brushing Austin vigorously. The horse fidgeted.

Skinner said, "Bullshit, Taylor. If you wasn't interested, you'd've told Reiter about me long ago."

Taylor didn't respond. What would have been the point of telling the 1st sergeant that Skinner was thinking of deserting? Reiter would not have been surprised. A third of recruits deserted before their enlistments were up. And what would Reiter have done about it anyway?

Deserting back in the Civil War could get a man shot. But desertion from the peacetime regular Army was not viewed so seriously, even by the Army itself. Many civilians thought a trooper who deserted was just using good sense and would even help the deserter. Few deserters were ever caught. The Army set off in pursuit of deserters mainly to get back the horse and equipment the deserter usually took with him. If caught, the deserter would face no worse punishment than serving out the remainder of his enlistment period in prison, albeit at hard labor probably.

Taylor whispered, "Skinner, even if I was going to take French leave, I wouldn't abandon my post and leave the fort unguarded."

Skinner scoffed. "Unguarded from what? Hell, the nearest Indian is twenty miles away at the agency. And they never start anythin' anyway."

Taylor said, "Drop it, Skinner."

But Skinner didn't. "Dutch and Mick are both eager. We're just waitin' for you."

Klausmeyer's name was inconvenient to say, so everyone called him Dutch, a corruption of Deutsch, meaning German. And Skinner shared a common prejudice against the Irish, and so he used the derogatory term Mick

for O'Dea.

Taylor leaned toward Skinner and spoke quietly. "Ok, I'm bored with the Army, Skinner, but I gave my word."

"Shit," Skinner commented. "What's your word worth?"

"I signed a paper for five years, and five years is—"

"A helluva long time," Skinner said. "That's what five years is, Taylor."

"I'd never be able to go back home."

"That's your own damn fault for usin' your real name to enlist," Skinner said.

"I'm proud of my name, Skinner, and I want to keep it. Besides, my folks would be ashamed to death once they found out."

"Fuck 'em, Taylor. Don't let 'em find out," Skinner said.

Taylor shook his head.

"Shit." Skinner turned back to his own horse and started brushing. But he quickly turned back to face Taylor. "What do you owe the Army, Taylor?"

"Skinner, we've been through this before."

"So they made you a corporal. Two fancy chevrons on your sleeves and a half-inch yellow stripe down your pantleg. Big fuckin' deal."

"Skinner, you hate anyone with ambition or talent or integrity or—"

"Don't make me puke, Taylor. No stripes are worth playin' kiss-ass with no shit-faced officers."

"I didn't play kiss-ass with any officers, Skinner."

"How much more they pay you than me, Taylor? Huh? Two bucks a month. You make a shitty fifteen dollars a month. A goddamned cowboy makes twice that."

"I didn't work for these stripes for the money," Taylor said.

"And a cowhand can come and go as he pleases, quit whenever he wants, not take a load of shit from officers and sergeants. And he can get paid in gold, so's he don't have to worry 'bout storekeepers discountin' his pay thirty or forty percent for changin' the greenbacks into gold."

"Skinner, forget it," Taylor said. "An oath is an oath."

"Oh, pu-lease," Skinner said.

Taylor set to brushing Austin's leg. What infuriated Taylor the most was that he thought Skinner's arguments had merit. He dreaded spending more years in the Army. He longed for the end of his enlistment. But he wouldn't quit.

Skinner hissed at Klausmeyer. "Hey, Dutch."

"Ja?"

Skinner jerked his head in Taylor's direction. "Talk to him, Dutch," he

whispered. “We’re all on guard duty again tonight. This could be the night.”

Klausmeyer moved away from his horse and picked up a pitchfork leaning against a post. Klausmeyer had given his horse the full name of Frederick the Great, after a former king of Prussia. But in practice, Klausmeyer simply called the horse Fritz, which had also been a nickname of the monarch.

Skinner had never bothered to give his horse a name.

Klausmeyer started to move straw around, moving closer to Taylor and Austin.

“Corporal?” Klausmeyer said. “Vhy not?” He kept his head and his voice down. He shuffled straw around.

“Why are you in such a hurry to quit, Dutch?” Taylor asked. “Thought you wanted to learn English better.”

“Ja, ja,” Klausmeyer said. “But I have mein dictionary here.” He patted a pocket in his pants. “Und mein newspapers. Und you could help me.”

“You’ve been talking to Skinner too much, Dutch,” Taylor said. He wasn’t trying to be funny. He set the brush and curry comb down and picked up a grooming cloth. He brushed down Austin’s hide, moving in the direction of the hair.

Klausmeyer chuckled. “Vell, dat may be true.”

“Besides, you never complain about anything. I don’t believe you’re the type to skip out.”

“Vell, I desert before, remember?”

Taylor smiled. Klausmeyer had deserted from the Prussian army so he could come to America. “Good point, Dutch.”

Reiter bellowed from down the row of horses. “Taylor, Klausmeyer!”

Taylor and Klausmeyer both froze.

Reiter shouted, “Stop your jabberin’ and get back to work!”

“Yes, Sergeant!”

“Jawohl, Herr Sergeant.”

Klausmeyer set the pitchfork back against the post. Before he went back to his horse he said to Taylor, “I could do vitout dat. Had enough in Prussia. You tink about it.”

Taylor was rubbing down Austin’s croup. “Dutch, I’ve had my fill of the Army, but—”

O’Dea, on the other side of Taylor in the line, was grooming his own horse, Dublin. O’Dea had copied Taylor’s approach to naming his horse. He deliberately bumped into Taylor. “Johnny, m’boy,” he said.

Taylor looked at O’Dea’s smiling face. The Irishman was a distinct

contrast to Klausmeyer. He was taller than Taylor and even slimmer. And he always seemed to be grinning. A smile seemed to be his natural facial expression. So a smile on O'Dea's face didn't necessarily reflect mirth. And where Klausmeyer was reticent, O'Dea was garrulous.

Taylor said, "You going to work on me, too, Sean?"

"Johnny, m'boy, when the snow piles up to the rooftops and the wind blasts those little devils of ice crystals through every crack in the barrack walls—Faith and begorrah! 'Tis in sunshine in Arizona I want to be spendin' me winters. Playin' baseball even in January."

Baseball was one of the fort's few recreations. Skinner was one of the few men who wouldn't join in.

O'Dea said, "I'm no snowbird like Piggy there." He nodded toward Skinner. "Wantin' to spend me winters in this frozen hell. Oink, oink."

"Damn you, Mick," Skinner said. "I'm no snowbird. If I signed up last fall for a warm fire and grub for the winter here, then why did I stick around when spring come?"

Taylor had wondered that himself, given how eager Skinner was to desert now.

O'Dea said, "Why, faith, and 'tis the whores at the hog ranch on Dead Squaw Creek that keeps you here." He grimaced in disgust. "Yuck."

"Don't you look down your nose at me, you damned Mick," Skinner insisted, more loudly than Taylor liked.

"Keep it down," Taylor said. "For God's sake, quiet."

Skinner continued. "Mick, you're not man enough to take on even one o' his women, much less all three at once like I do."

"Hmph," O'Dea snorted. "I've got me standards, Piggy. How anybody even thinks o' screwin' one of those sows is—"

"Ja," Klausmeyer joined in, chuckling. "I go der vonce. But jus' von look at dose vomen und I come right back. Ugh."

"A whore's a whore, Dutch," Skinner declared. "You bastards act like I was the only trooper who ever goes down there."

Taylor said, "Skinner, the lowest a whore can sink is to service soldiers. But the other men go there because there isn't any other choice. You go there because you prefer it."

O'Dea and Klausmeyer laughed.

Skinner asked, "Don't you ever want to get fucked, Taylor?"

"Sure, but I'm going to wait for a woman I can love and who'll love me back."

"Oh, Jesus," Skinner said. "I'm gonna puke. You're a fuckin'

saint, Taylor."

Taylor grinned. There was a clever double meaning to that insult. But he didn't think Skinner had meant it intentionally or would even understand the humor of it. Taylor said, "And I want a woman who won't give me the clap, Skinner."

O'Dea laughed.

Klausmeyer, frowning, asked, "Vhat ist dis clap you say?" He clapped his hands together a couple of times lightly. "Like dat?"

Taylor smiled. "No, Dutch, *the* clap is a disease you pick up from unclean whores. *A* clap is what you were doing just now."

"Clap," Klausmeyer repeated. "Confusin'. Much of English like dat."

Taylor nodded. "Yes. Same word but different uses."

O'Dea said, "Piggy, do they actually make you pay for them sluts?"

"Your money's gone as fast as mine is, Mick."

Taylor said, "He's got a point there, Sean." He grinned at O'Dea. He put the grooming cloth back on its nail and reached for a grooming sponge. He dipped it in the water bucket and squeezed excess water out of it.

"Ah, Johnny, m'boy, 'tis me drinkin' at the sutler's saloon you be referrin' to." He held up a hand. "Guilty. Next to brawlin' I loves me liquor best. Johnny, m'boy, how you manage to save any o' your pay escapes me."

Taylor said, "I've got over a hundred dollars stashed away." He was washing out Austin's eyes and peering carefully into them.

"Faith and begorrah," O'Dea said.

"Someday I'm going to get married, Sean." He moved down to Austin's nostrils and started gently wiping. "And—"

Reiter's booming voice from right behind them instantly halted the conversation. "Damn me, Corp. Taylor. It's a goddamned kaffeeklatsch goin' on here."

All four troopers jumped. Taylor poked Austin hard enough that the horse snorted and jerked his head back. O'Dea fell to briskly brushing his horse's near-side flank. Skinner and Klausmeyer both brushed at their horses.

"Seein' as how you four have so much spare time on your hands, you can all come back here after supper and clean the stables."

Four sets of shoulders slumped. "Yes, Sergeant. Aye, Sergeant. Jawohl, Herr Sergeant."

"Now get back to work!" Reiter shouted. "Stay on task."

"Yes, Sergeant. Aye, Sergeant. Jawohl, Herr Sergeant."

O'Dea, flustered, picked up his water bucket and headed for the stream.

"Halt," Reiter ordered.

O'Dea froze.

"Haven't you already watered your horse, O'Dea?"

"Aye, Sergeant, but he still seems thirsty."

"Hm. Well, okay. Go get him some more water."

"Aye, Sergeant." O'Dea hustled away from the stables.

Reiter harumphed and stomped down the line of horses.

Taylor sighed. Guard duty *and* stable duty on the same day. Extra stable duty was used so often as punishment that almost no trooper had to clean stables *except* as punishment.

Skinner muttered, "Goddamned son-of-a-bitch."

Taylor said, "He's a good soldier, Skinner. Dare say he'll never make the same out of you." He finished Austin's nostrils and headed for the animal's rear.

Skinner snorted. "And what use is there for that anyway?"

"You might need it someday."

"For what?"

"For the Sioux, dummy." Taylor gave Austin's anus a swipe with the sponge.

"Shit," Skinner said. "How often do we even see an Indian around here? That agent Scheid don't want no soldier blue near his precious Sioux."

"You never know," Taylor said. "Look at the Meeker massacre back in September and October."

Ute Indians on the White River Indian Reservation in northwestern Colorado attacked the Indian Agency there, killed the Indian Agent, Nathan Meeker, and his ten male employees and took their women and children as hostages. The Utes then ambushed a cavalry column sent to the agency's rescue in a week-long engagement called the Battle of Milk River. Casualties were heavy on both sides. More cavalry eventually succeeded in capturing the remaining Utes and freeing the hostages.

"Yeah, well, those were Utes," Skinner said. "Mean bastards."

Taylor said, "They killed the commanding officer of the column sent to aid Meeker, Maj. Thomas Thornburgh, and more than a dozen troopers."

"Like I said," Skinner said, but he didn't finish the statement.

Taylor thought Skinner was giving the disaster serious thought. Taylor said, "The Utes there may have given the Sioux here ideas."

Skinner shrugged. "Not that we've heard."

They were interrupted by a distant splash and a blast of profanity from O'Dea at the creek. Laughter from other troopers at the creek didn't help O'Dea's disposition. From the stables O'Dea could be seen rising from the

creek's icy water, dripping and shivering.

All the men of B Troop stopped their work and listened to O'Dea curse. He had an extensive vocabulary and an accent that made it all sound poetic. Even Reiter listened patiently with an appreciative grin on his face.

O'Dea was the troubadour of the entire garrison. In the barracks in the evening he could have the men rolling on the floor in laughter with his bawdy lyrics or have them dabbing at their eyes with a rendition of some mournful Irish ballad. And the only times there were more than a handful of men in the chapel on a Sunday were those days when O'Dea used his rich baritone on some hymns, during his periodic bouts of getting religious.

Taylor looked at Skinner. The man wasn't even grinning. Skinner rarely laughed, and he never shed a tear. Taylor shook his head. He rinsed out the sponge and put it back on the shelf on the stable wall. Other troopers went back to their chores.

"Taylor?" Skinner said.

"What?" He looked back at Skinner.

Skinner said, "Okay, maybe you won't go, but if the three of us try it tonight without you, would you try to stop us?"

"Skinner, if the three of you slipped out while I was corporal of the guard, I'd be lucky if they just shot me."

"Ja," Klausmeyer added from behind Skinner. "Nein, Skinner. I don't vant to get der Corporal in trouble. I von't go vitout Johnny."

"Damn all o' you," Skinner muttered. "Even you, Dutch. Bunkie or not."

"Ja, ja," Klausmeyer said, smiling.

Taylor had to smile at that himself. He recognized that Klausmeyer was the only man in the troop that Skinner tried not to antagonize. Bunkies were like that.

Reiter called out, "O'Dea!"

O'Dea had been walking back up the path, carrying his bucket of water. Water dripped from his uniform. He stopped. "Sergeant?"

Reiter said, "Put that bucket down and go get into dry clothes. You'll freeze to death before you get to the stables."

"Thank you, Sergeant," O'Dea said brightly.

"Don't thank me, O'Dea," Reiter said. "I just don't want any man here wastin' his time draggin' your sorry dead carcass away."

"No, Sergeant." O'Dea sounded a bit deflated, but it also sounded like he had been smiling when he spoke.

"And to help you learn not to be so damned clumsy, you'll polish all the boots of a dozen men in your troop this evening."

Now O'Dea did sound deflated. "Aye, Sergeant."

O'Dea put the bucket down and started off toward the barracks.

Taylor said, "Skinner, why don't you just take off by yourself someday?" He'd be glad to see him gone.

"I'm not fool enough to go travelin' alone in this country," Skinner answered. "That's too much temptation for some young Sioux bucks."

"Afraid?" Klausmeyer asked with a smile.

"No," Skinner snapped. "But I ain't stupid neither, Dutch. I mean to live a long time."

"Probably will, too," Taylor mumbled. Life wasn't fair.

Skinner spat into the straw. "I'll be at your funeral, you goddamned saint, Taylor. You'll be in heaven long before I'm in hell."

"Vell, speak o' der devil," Klausmeyer said. "Der's dat Indian agent, Herr Scheid." He nodded toward the road leading into the fort's parade grounds. A horse and buckboard had just arrived.

Taylor added, "And his daughter, Jeannie. Oh, my, my."

Klausmeyer nodded. "Ja, ein sehr schönes Mädchen." He gave a soft whistle.

Jeannie Scheid was seventeen with long blonde hair kept in place with a bonnet. At the moment she was bundled in a heavy coat, but Taylor remembered her well back in summer when a simple dress accentuated her young woman's attractive figure. And he thought she had the most beautiful face he'd ever seen on a woman. He clearly remembered each time he had seen her over the last year or so, especially those few times when he had actually gotten to exchange a few words with her. Far too few.

And seeing Jeannie heightened Taylor's dissatisfaction with the Army. How could he ever meet and marry—or even just meet—an eligible young woman out here on the Dakota prairie? Boredom was bad enough, but frustration and lost opportunities were achingly worse. And Jeannie Scheid, specifically, might just as well have been living on the moon.

Skinner said, "Now there's a piece of ass I'd loved to poke all night."

Taylor felt like punching Skinner. "Skinner, you're disgusting."

"Bullshit, Taylor," Skinner said. "You're thinkin' the same thing. You just won't admit it, not out loud at least."

Taylor didn't say anything. Skinner was right. Still, he wouldn't have expressed it so crudely. More like: My heart's desire would be to make tender love to that angel throughout a blessed night of bliss. Or something like that.

Klausmeyer asked, "Vhy dey here, you suppose?"

Scheid had stopped the buckboard in front of the fort headquarters. He

helped Jeannie down from the wagon. Then he stepped up onto the porch of the building. Jeannie went in the other direction.

Taylor said, "She's headed for the sutler's store, but it looks like Scheid is going to see the colonel."

"Mus' be important," Klausmeyer said.

"Who gives a shit?" Skinner muttered.

O'Dea, walking past the end of the stables, started singing Stephen Foster's ballad:

> *I dream of Jeanie with the light brown hair,*
> *Borne, like a vapor, on the summer air;*
> *I see her tripping where the bright streams play,*
> *Happy as the daisies that dance on her way.*

O'Dea bowed toward Jeannie Scheid at a distance, and she smiled and nodded to him in return, pleased at his vocal compliment.

And in the stables, many of the troopers joined Taylor, unavoidably affected by O'Dea's rendering, in a carnal fantasy as each man watched Jeannie Scheid march toward the sutler's store.

Chapter Two

Inside the commandant's office, Lt. Col. Ezra Beech, the commanding officer of Fort Grummond, stabbed with a poker at the gray and red coals in the pot-bellied stove in the corner of the office, trying to coax more heat from them. He sighed and leaned the poker against the wall. "Well, nothing for it," he mumbled. Reluctantly he grabbed the last chunk of firewood lying next to the stove and dropped it strategically on the coals. Firewood was scarce, and Beech tried to conserve it. But it was cold in his office.

He closed the iron door of the stove and straightened up. He hobbled to a window, relying on the cane he had been using for several weeks. He peered out the window at the misty scene. It was only November, and the long Dakota winter stretched ahead. Perhaps he could persuade the Army to ship some coal to the fort. Ah, but even though coal was cheap, shipping it to Fort Grummond was not.

There was a knock at the office door.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Scheid to see you, sir," a muffled, deferential voice called from the other side of the closed door.

Beech turned to look at the door. "Really?" What was the issue that compelled the Indian Agent to come himself? Ordinarily, messages were delivered by one of his employees. Could there be trouble with the Sioux on the reservation? Ever since the Meeker Massacre there had been heightened concern about a ripple effect. So far, there had been no sign that the uprising by the Utes in Colorado had induced the local Sioux to consider similar ill-advised actions. But maybe something had finally happened.

"Well, have Mr. Scheid come in, Sgt. Webster," Beech said. He made his way slowly to his desk but didn't sit down.

"Yes, sir."

Beech's office door opened, and the sergeant stood back and allowed the Indian agent to stride into the office. He closed the door after Scheid.

Orville Scheid was a tall, erect man, and his clothes hung loosely on a thin frame. He was holding his hat casually at his side, so his quite bald head was conspicuous.

"Mr. Scheid," Beech said. He held out a hand as the Indian agent reached the desk. Their dealings were usually rather formal; Beech could never bring himself to address the agent familiarly as Orville. And he got the impression that Scheid preferred it that way anyway.

Scheid shook Beech's hand. "Colonel," Scheid said.

Beech gestured with a hand toward one of the two captain chairs positioned in front of his desk. "Won't you take a seat, sir?"

Scheid said, "Thank you, sir." He nodded and sat down. He rested both feet on the floor and kept his hat in his lap.

Beech dropped awkwardly into his desk chair with a grunt.

"How's the gout, Colonel?"

Beech hooked his cane on the edge of the desktop. Using both hands he swung his right leg, foot bandaged, under the desk. "Terrible," he said. He studied Scheid's face and posture for just a moment. He detected no sense of anxiety in the agent's demeanor. "Well, Mr. Scheid, what brings you personally here so late on this frosty afternoon?" He smiled a little, for he could never stop wondering how an Indian would go about scalping the agent.

Scheid said, "First, Colonel, I've not come alone. My older daughter, Jeannie, is with me."

Beech smiled warmly. "Oh, very good, sir. Delighted." But then his smile vanished. "Oh, I pray she is not here for the attentions of our post doctor."

Scheid shook his head. "No, no, nothing like that. Her mother is quite skilled in such matters and can see to almost any medical issue herself."

"Of course," Beech said. He thought it was just as well. Fort Grummond's surgeon had done nothing to help his gout.

"But it does mean that we would like to impose upon your hospitality and spend the night at the fort."

"Of course," Beech said enthusiastically. "You can use the spare bedroom my wife and I have in our quarters, and I am sure all five of the wives of the married officers will fight over the opportunity to provide accommodations for your daughter."

"Thank you, sir."

"Indeed, I'm sure your daughter will be the center of attention of all the wives this evening."

Scheid smiled. "Well, her mother did want her to buy a few items at the sutler's store, but a chance for some congenial company of officers' wives was indeed Jeannie's primary motivation to accompany me this afternoon."

Beech nodded. "Your daughter is a fine, accomplished young lady, Mr. Scheid. All the officers' wives attest to that."

"Thank you, Colonel."

"And your wife, sir?" Beech asked. "I assume she is well?"

"Oh, yes," Scheid said. "She is home at the agency with Katie and Billy. She sends her compliments with Jeannie to the officers' wives."

There was another knock at the door.

Beech said, "Yes, Sergeant?"

"Sir, Maj. Prescott is here. He wants to know if you desire his presence."

"Oh, how convenient," Beech said. "Let him in."

The office door opened, and the sergeant stood back and allowed the major to step just inside the office and stop. Maj. Prescott was a solid, powerfully built man, and he seemed to fill the doorway.

"Sir," Prescott said, "I saw Mr. Scheid arrive, and I thought perhaps I might be of service."

Beech said, "Yes, well timed, Major." He waved a hand toward the other chair in front of his desk.

Prescott entered the room. Sgt. Webster closed the door after him.

The major set his big frame into the chair with grace. The chair squeaked at the strain.

Prescott nodded to the Indian agent. "Mr. Scheid," he said simply.

"Major," the Indian agent returned, without looking at the major.

Beech said, "So, Mr. Scheid, what is the issue? I don't get the sense that it is some sort of emergency."

"No emergency, Colonel," Scheid said. "Your word *issue* is a good way to describe the situation, less alarming than the word *emergency*. And employing the precise word needed is always important and effective. As is the issue itself."

"All right," Beech said, a bit impatiently.

"Dealing with the Sioux," Scheid said, "requires understanding, sympathy, tact, diplomacy, and kindness. But firmness, too."

Beech nodded casually, but he glanced at Prescott with a twinkle in his eye. The major had emitted a soft snort. They each had that here-we-go-again look. They had heard Scheid's speeches more frequently than they desired, and they would have agreed that the agent's statement was ironic, for they didn't think that the man possessed any of the qualities he'd just mentioned—except the last one.

Scheid said, "As soon as Columbus set foot in the New World, the fate of the aborigines of the continent was sealed. Their way of life doomed. Their way of life, their culture, their identity would inevitably be supplanted by that of the more advanced European, who found a continent rich in resources and underutilized by the first peoples, and ripe for exploitation and progress."

Beech said, "Uh-huh."

"The Indians have only two choices: assimilation or extinction."

"Those are stark choices, Mr. Scheid," Prescott said. "I don't think the

Sioux see the same two choices that you do."

Beech said, "Major, please don't interrupt." He looked at Prescott as if to say he wanted Scheid's speech over as quickly as possible.

"Yes, sir," Prescott said.

Scheid said, "Well, they will eventually, Maj. Prescott. And I advocate the first fate whereas the military favors the latter."

Beech said, "Now, that's not fair, Mr. Scheid."

Scheid waved a hand. "No matter. I withdraw my insinuation."

Beech said, "Please continue, Mr. Scheid."

"Well," Scheid said, "in order to civilize the Sioux, or any of our American aborigines, for that matter, you need to show them that you are their friend and teacher, not a jailkeeper."

"All right," Beech said. He could have recited the agent's speech for him.

"But there is a delicate balance between kindness on the one hand and weakness on the other."

"Yes."

"It is counterproductive to constantly humiliate the Sioux by having soldiers posted on the agency."

Beech frowned. "I have done my part, Mr. Scheid," Beech said. "I allow no soldiers on the agency proper without your consent. I'm sure you'll agree that that far exceeds War Department regulations."

"I do, Colonel," Scheid said. "And I am most grateful for your cooperation."

Beech added, "Even after Agent Meeker and his employees were killed by the Utes in Colorado. I offered to post a troop at the agency, but you declined it."

"Yes, I did," Scheid said. "I have nothing to fear from the Sioux on the Buffalo Creek Indian Reservation."

Prescott said, "Meeker said the same thing about the Utes on the White River Agency."

Scheid looked exasperated. "Well, I am not Nathan Meeker. Now, he was a generous man. But he was an impractical dreamer. He thought that by kindness and gentleness he could quickly bring the Utes to a fully assimilated state of being. But he was in too much of a hurry. He put up fences and plowed up land that the Utes wanted for pasturing their horses. They could not tolerate that. So they revolted."

Prescott said, "But aren't you also trying to convert the Sioux into farmers?"

"*Gradually*," Scheid emphasized. "Gradually. Yes, I've introduced

farming, but only on a small scale and involving mostly the women. They do take to it naturally. But I don't use plows or fences. And I let the men keep their horse culture. In contrast, I point out, to Nathan Meeker, who deliberately tried to extinguish the horse culture of the Utes."

Prescott said, "I thought you said their culture was doomed anyway."

Beech said, "Major, please."

Scheid said, "It is, eventually. But not this generation. It's the younger generations that can be assimilated, not the current generations."

Beech said, "Ah, the current generation is too fixed in its ways."

Scheid nodded. "Yes, that's it exactly." He looked at Prescott. "And may I point out to you that troops were of no help to Meeker?"

Prescott said, "I thought you'd bring that up."

"The Utes ambushed the first column of cavalry sent and defeated them."

Beech said, "The Utes are fierce antagonists and clever as well."

"So, Colonel," Scheid said, "you can see why I declined your offer of a troop of cavalry at the agency. Any security they would have provided was illusionary."

"You have a point there, Mr. Scheid," Beech allowed. "Is that why you're here? Have soldiers been at the agency?"

Scheid shook his head. "No. But I emphasize why I do not permit soldiers at the agency. You must not continually remind the Sioux of their fall from prominence," Scheid continued. "They are a proud people, and justifiably so. Continually reminding the Sioux that they are a conquered people would merely make them defensive, surly, and uncooperative. The exact opposite of what is needed to facilitate their assimilation into the American civilization."

"Excuse me, Mr. Scheid," Prescott said. "I thought the Sioux at this agency preferred to be called Lakota."

Scheid closed his eyes briefly. "It is merely a word, Major. The name doesn't matter. They are all simply Sioux to the United States government. I call them Sioux. They can call themselves whatever they want."

"I see," Prescott said. And therein, Prescott thought to himself, lay part of Scheid's problem with the local Indians.

"And yet," Scheid said, raising a finger, "the Sioux must be made to realize that their nomadic, warrior existence is over. They must be made to realize what their true relationship to the white man is from now on."

"Gradually," Prescott said.

"Yes, gradually," Scheid said.

"Ah," said Beech. "Maybe I'm beginning to see your problem."

"Probably not, Colonel," Scheid said. "Now, occasionally it must be

demonstrated to them that they are wards of the United States government now and that as an agent of that government I—must—be—obeyed." Scheid emphasized the latter phrase by pounding a fist into the opposite palm with each of the last words.

"So you want a show of force?" Beech asked.

Scheid grimaced, then sighed deeply. "Well, not so much a show of force as a demonstration of authority, of preeminence."

Prescott said, "What's the difference?"

Scheid ignored him. "A demonstration of the superiority and magnificence of the white American civilization. In order for the Sioux to become part of that civilization—"

Prescott said, "They don't want to become part of it."

"Maj. Prescott," Scheid said patiently. "Their only other choice is your preference of annihilation."

"Mr. Scheid," Beech said sternly.

Scheid went on. "Sooner or later they will recognize the manifest advantages of the white man's culture."

Prescott said, "In a couple of generations, huh?"

Scheid scowled at him. "No, it won't take that long."

Beech said, "Maj. Prescott, I warned you."

"Yes, sir."

Beech turned back to Scheid. "So, what are you saying, Mr. Scheid? They disobeyed you in some way?"

"Yes, well, in order for the Sioux to be able to interact properly with the white man, they must learn to speak English."

Beech looked puzzled. "Some of them already do. Chief Stone Bear, for example, does quite well, doesn't he?"

"I wouldn't say that exactly, Colonel," Scheid said. "But, yes, he does speak English to a useful extent. But there are very few who do," Scheid said. "Their proficiency is poor."

Prescott asked, "Can't you just use interpreters like Milo Ackerman, Mr. Scheid? Or you learn *their* language?"

"I will not learn their language," Scheid said forcefully.

Beech said, "But your wife and daughter have learned some of their language. I know they have. Which is quite an achievement, seeing how difficult the Sioux language is."

It was obviously a sore point with Scheid. "I've asked them not to use the language, but Cynthia and Jeannie are—are—"

"Stubborn?" Prescott suggested.

Beech scowled at the major. "Major."

"Sir."

Scheid said, "Their culture is defeated, dying, and their language must be extinguished. Gradually. By discouraging its use and allowing it to simply vanish. I make it a point," he emphasized, "not to use any words of theirs I might inadvertently pick up."

"Doesn't all that make communication difficult?" Prescott asked.

"Yes," Scheid said, "and the more difficulty the better. That way they will more quickly see the advantage of learning English as soon as possible."

Beech looked puzzled. "But your wife and daughter are already teaching the Sioux children English now, aren't they?"

"That must be difficult," Prescott commented.

"Not really, Maj. Prescott," Scheid said. "All children learn quickly."

"Then what's the problem?" Beech asked.

"The problem, gentlemen, is Stone Bear."

"Stone Bear is a problem?" Prescott said. "That toothless, wrinkled-up, old buzzard is a problem?"

Scheid sighed. "Major, you would be wise not to measure a book by its cover."

"What?"

"Old Chief Stone Bear may not be in the prime of life, Major, but he has—unfortunately—great influence in the Sioux camps."

Prescott said, "Derived mainly from his effectiveness in murdering white men, women, and children for many years."

"It wasn't murder," Scheid snapped. "It was war. And, yes, there were atrocities, on both sides, Major. But the wars are over. The Sioux have made peace now."

"That's debatable," Prescott sniffed.

"Mr. Scheid, just what did Stone Bear do?" Beech asked.

"He told all the camps that the children should not learn English. He ordered all the children out of the agency school."

"Did they leave?"

"Yes. All of them. Instantly."

"Well," Prescott grunted. "That tough old goat."

Beech himself had a smirk on his face. "Well, uh—"

Scheid said, "This is not humorous, gentlemen. Stone Bear's edict is a serious impediment to the children's education and my program of eventual advancement of the Sioux people."

Beech cleared his throat. "So, Mr. Scheid, you want me to send troops to

force Stone Bear to order the children back to school. Is that it?"

Scheid squirmed a bit. "No, not *force* him exactly, Colonel. *Persuade* is a better word. Maybe even *encourage*. I'm looking for the perfect word."

"Persuade," Beech repeated, skeptically.

"Yes," Scheid said. "Impress upon Chief Stone Bear the ultimate futility of his resistance to my efforts to assimilate the Sioux into the white man's culture. I think a single company of cavalry would suffice."

Beech said, "At Fort Grummond that may be less than 50 men, Mr. Scheid. No company at the fort has anywhere near a full complement."

Prescott said, "A single troop won't impress the Sioux; it will only insult them. These are the people who decimated Custer's entire regiment at the Little Big Horn. Thornburgh had over 150 men at the Milk River when the Utes killed him and a dozen of his men."

"Major," Scheid said patiently. "You needn't be concerned. My Sioux are quite peaceful."

"They're all farmers now, right?" Prescott said.

"Not farmers, actually," Scheid said. "I like to think I am turning them into ranchers. But, as a matter of fact, I think the small harvest we had this past fall showed real promise."

"I heard it was abysmal," Prescott countered. "This is terrible farmland; it's buffalo country, cattle country. At least you make some sense wanting to turn them into ranchers rather than farmers."

"Thank you for even that small concession, Major," Scheid said. "We'll do better next year. Meanwhile we shall continue to provide generous subsidies."

"Generous?" Prescott asked. He gave a snort.

Beech scowled at Prescott yet again.

Scheid said, "Yes. Another contrast between me and Nathan Meeker. His distribution of subsidies left much to be desired, though that was more Washington's fault than his. And I also allow my charges to hunt off the reservation. Meeker didn't."

"You mean *raid* off the reservation, don't you?" Prescott said.

"Major!" Beech snapped.

Scheid shook his head slowly and gave a sigh of hopelessness. "Colonel, I fear to most of the military all Indians are hostile."

Beech shook his head quickly. "No, certainly not."

"It's a safe way to operate," Prescott said.

"But wrong," Scheid said, jerking his head around to glare at Prescott. Then he crossed his legs and leaned back in the chair, touching his fingertips

together. “I freely admit that there are some troublemakers on some of the other reservations who—”

“Other reservations?” Prescott asked.

“Yes, Major, on other reservations,” Scheid repeated. “You’ll not find any of *my* Indians making trouble.”

“Bah,” Prescott said. “Just because we can’t find ‘em making mischief doesn’t mean they aren’t doing it.”

“Major,” Beech snapped once more. He rapped his knuckles on his desk.

Prescott crossed his arms defiantly. “Sir,” he said.

“Thank you, Colonel,” Scheid said. “But that was unnecessary. I realize that the major and I have radically different views on the Sioux. Thank God it is you, with your more enlightened attitude, who is in command here and not him.”

“Hm,” was all that Beech said.

Prescott looked at Beech as if looking over a pair of reading glasses. He grinned and raised his eyebrows.

Beech cleared his throat.

Scheid went on. “Now, the camps are scattered all along Buffalo Creek. I wish to visit only Stone Bear’s camp. One troop will be sufficient to impress one Indian.”

“It won’t work,” Prescott muttered.

Beech said, “All right, Mr. Scheid. I will have one troop accompany you to the agency tomorrow morning. When did you wish to leave?”

Scheid said, “I know the Army likes to set out at dawn, but I believe my daughter will prefer to tarry a bit longer than that.”

Beech smiled. “I fully understand your indulgence, sir. Shall we say ten o’clock?”

Scheid nodded. “That will be satisfactory, Colonel. We should be able to visit Stone Bear in the late afternoon tomorrow.”

Beech smiled. “Very well.”

Scheid said, “And tomorrow night I can offer you and the officers in the troop accommodations for the night in my agency buildings.”

Beech glanced down at his foot. “Unfortunately, my present affliction prevents me from riding a horse.”

“Ah, of course.”

“Maj. Prescott will be in command of the detachment.”

Scheid stiffened. “Is that necessary? Doesn’t the company have its own commander?”

“Yes, but I believe a mission of this importance requires that the most

senior officer available at the fort be in command, which is Maj. Prescott. It will be more impressive to have a senior officer at the head of the column."

Scheid looked at Prescott, displeasure in his countenance even if his words had not conveyed the same reaction. "I suppose that is a point, Colonel."

Prescott simply smiled at Scheid. "What about the troopers, Mr. Scheid. Can you shelter them, too?"

Scheid said, "A few sergeants perhaps, but I fear your rank and file will have to make do with the ground. But in anticipation of that, I have gathered an ample supply of firewood for their comfort."

"Thank you, Mr. Scheid."

Scheid rose slowly to his feet, and the two Army officers rose, too, though Beech took a lot of effort to do so. Scheid raised a finger. "Oh, I'll need Mr. Ackerman to come along," Scheid said.

"What for?" Beech asked. "Stone Bear speaks enough English, right?"

Scheid's jaw muscles tightened. "Yes, but he refuses to use it now."

Prescott snickered and Beech tried to suppress a quick smile.

"It is not humorous, Major," Scheid snapped.

"You shall have Ackerman, Mr. Scheid," Beech promised.

Scheid said, "Thank you, Colonel." He started toward the door. "I will find Jeannie, see what plans she has made with the ladies of the fort for this evening."

"Very well," Beech said. "And we'll see you for dinner this evening? Say, 7:00 pm?"

"Yes," Scheid said cheerfully. "That would be most welcome."

"Fine, then. Maj. Prescott, I think your company at the dinner would also be appropriate."

The shoulders of both Scheid and Prescott sagged.

Prescott said, "Very good, sir."

Scheid said, "I suppose." He bowed a bit. "Colonel."

"Mr. Scheid."

Scheid left the office briskly and closed the door behind himself.

The two officers listened until the clump of Scheid's shoes ceased.

Beech turned to Prescott angrily. "Nels," he said, "you must stop badgering Scheid about his Indians." He dropped back into his chair and grimaced.

"Sorry, Ezra," Prescott said. He sat back down. "I just can't stand that pious nincompoop and his preaching about his innocent Indians. You know as well as I do, they go raiding off the reservation during the summer and fall

and only come back to winter over on government food and warm Army blankets."

"Which Scheid hands out stingily, too, despite his claims of generosity" Beech added. "But he *is* the agent on this reservation, Nels."

"The reservations should be under the sole jurisdiction of the Army. Putting civilians out here to administer these treaties only ensures eventual trouble."

"But you have to admit that there's been no trouble on the Buffalo Creek Reservation," Beech pointed out. "Almost none."

"They make their trouble elsewhere. Why, you can see the results of their depredations when you go to their camps."

"Circumstantial evidence, Nels."

"Bah."

Beech drummed the fingers of one hand on his desk. Then he casually tapped the silver oak leaf on one of his shoulder straps. "You see this?"

Prescott straightened up. "Yes, sir."

"Now, Nels, I'm not pulling rank on you. That's not my point."

"It's not?"

"We've been friends a long time, ever since we fought Robert E. Lee together in Virginia. Well, I had two stars on those straps then. Major general."

"I had eagles myself," Prescott said wistfully. "Colonel of my own regiment."

"Yes. But hardly anyone kept his Civil War rank after the war. Even Custer dropped from major general of volunteers to lieutenant colonel in the regular Army."

Prescott sighed. "I went from a first lieutenant of regulars at the beginning of the war to colonel by the end of the war and back down to captain in the regular cavalry after the war."

"You were lucky it wasn't all the way back down to first lieutenant."

Prescott nodded. "Yeah."

"Nels, I want to be a general again, just as you would like to be a colonel again."

"Promotions are glacial in the peacetime Army," Prescott said. "It took me eleven goddamn years to make major in this regiment, Ezra. And I've only got three years in that grade now. How many years before I make it to even lieutenant colonel, much less colonel again? Will I live that long?"

"You'll never make it, Nels, if you keep shooting your mouth off." Beech leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk. "Look, during the war with

the South there was ample opportunity for promotion. A rapidly expanding Army and one battle after another in which an officer could display his initiative, his skill, and his courage. And horrific casualties meant there were always more advanced slots to fill."

"Yeah."

"Where is that opportunity now, out here? There's no glory in fighting Indians. Only Custer's kind. Or Thornburgh's."

"No, thanks," Prescott said, raising a hand. He had to smile.

"The battles out here aren't like the ones back in the Civil War. Out here there are no massed bodies of troops, no bands playing, no flags waving, no chivalry. Out here it's sneaky and dirty and cruel and vicious and to the death. And when you do get into a fight, women and children are invariably killed and then you're blasted from pulpit and press. No. There's no glory in fighting Indians."

Prescott frowned. "What exactly is your point, Ezra? How does this discussion fit in with the one troop I'm supposed to take with Scheid?"

"My point is that even the Sioux wars are over now. All we got left is insignificant police actions, like rounding up the Utes in Colorado. Small, grubby, monotonous, hard, and dangerous. And of no importance to anyone, except to the troopers who get killed. And maybe to a few settlers and the railroad."

Prescott nodded. "Yeah, it's not promising."

"So, Nels, you have to keep your nose clean. Promotions won't come from what you do but they can be *lost* by what you do. So, not a single disapproving letter in your file. The slightest note of criticism, the tiniest hint of complaint from anyone, even from someone like Scheid, and your promotion is doomed."

Prescott nodded. "You're right, of course, Ezra. But I just find it so hard to listen to that jackass."

"But, Nels, that's exactly the kind of thing you are going to be judged on. How well you can listen to the man without provoking him. How well you cooperate with him. Tact and diplomacy and cooperation are now far more important than courage and battlefield leadership. Do you see that?"

"But, Ezra, Scheid treats *all* the Sioux like children, not just the actual children. He humiliates them. Reasoning with them, rewards, punishments, slaps on the wrists, coaxing, lecturing. Bah. The Sioux aren't farmers; they're warriors. They laugh at him behind his back. And there's only one language *warriors* understand. Cold steel. That's what. I'd treat them like men, with respect. You lost. That's the way it is. So you have to do as we say. None of

this go-stand-in-the-corner school-boy stuff that Scheid dishes out."

"Nels, you're a stubborn man. Just watch it or you'll be a major the rest of your Army career."

"Well, thanks for the advice, Ezra."

"There's more," Beech said. And for this he got painfully to his feet.

Prescott was surprised at Beech's action. He knew how much the colonel's gout hurt him. He rose quickly to his feet. "Yes?"

"Maj. Prescott," Beech said.

Prescott noted the change to formality. "Yes, sir?"

Beech clasped his hands behind his back. "Major, I don't care if you want to throw your career away, but I'm not going to let you throw away *my* career, too. And I am going to be judged on how well I can control my subordinates, how well I get them to perform. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir," Prescott said.

"Therefore, you will cooperate fully with Scheid, no matter how asinine you consider his ideas. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know it won't be easy, Major. You'll need the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job. But you must try, because if I get any complaints from Scheid about you, I'm going to come down hard on you. Is that clear, Major?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

"All right, sir, I'll take Gordon's H Troop. It's the largest troop."

"No, take B Troop," Beech said.

"But Captain Reynolds is sick. Lt. Templeton would be in command, and he's only been out here a few months."

"I know, but that dandy'll put on a good show all by himself. And that's what we need—a show, a spectacle. So, boots polished, sabers, the works."

"Even sabers?"

"Yes. Where's Ackerman?"

"Probably passed out under a table in the bar at the post sutler's."

"Find him and sober him up. Take him along."

"Yes, sir."

"Take three days rations with you, just in case there's a delay. Each man to take twelve pounds of forage for his horse with him. Skip the forage wagon. This is just a parade, not a patrol."

"Yes, sir."

"Any questions, Major?"

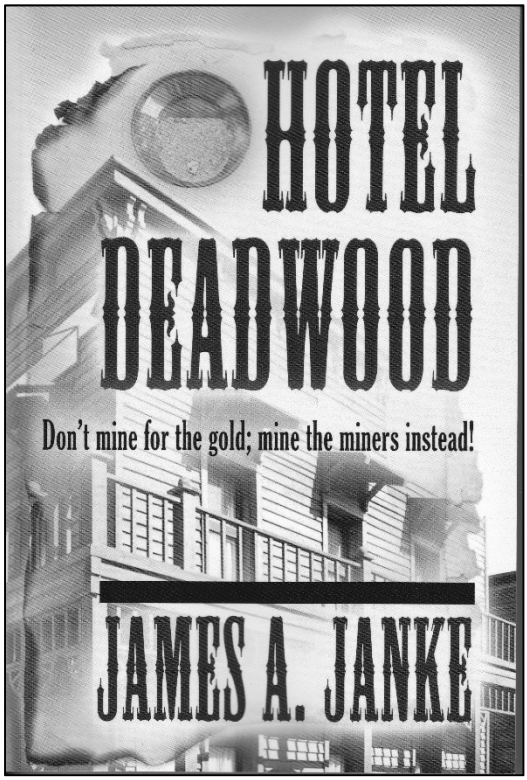
"No, sir."

About the Author

Jim Janke is fascinated by 19th Century American history, especially the West and the Civil War. He has an extensive library on both subjects. He regularly visits Civil War battlefields and museums in the East and travels frequently throughout the West, finding inspiration and authenticity for his absorbing novels.

http://jimjanke.com

Hotel Deadwood
is another Western of mine I think you would enjoy.



Owen Buchanan, along with his brother, Philo, his cousin, Willis, and a neighbor, Lucas, leave farming behind and rush west, enticed by the news of gold in the Black Hills. It's a long walk with a bull train from Fort Pierre on the Missouri River to Deadwood. Near the end they rescue Dr. Hiram Gruenhagen, his wife Willemina, and their beautiful daughter Josephine from the Sioux.

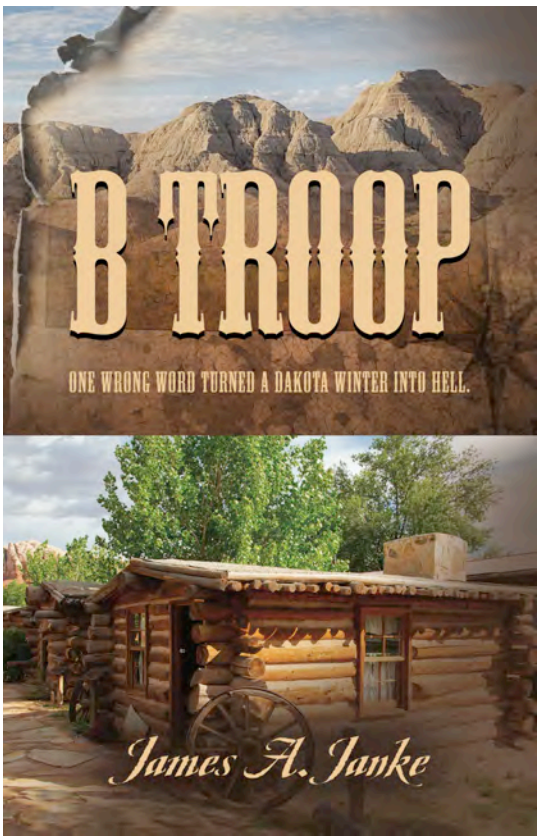
Owen and his companions join Everett Miller, Lucas's uncle, on his placer mining claim. Everett is their guide to bold, bustling Deadwood at the height of its wild, giddy, boomtown days in July 1876, when the

only law was the pistol a man carried. They meet Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane and others, including the notorious Stark brothers and their outlaw gang.

Owen soon realizes that mining the miners is a faster, easier path to wealth than mining itself. He and Philo quickly establish the primitive Hotel Deadwood and bill it as the cheapest hotel in town.

And, of course, they compete for the affections of alluring Josephine.

But the Buchanans clash with the Starks, which leads to deadly violence. And maybe this story tells the real reason Jack McCall shot Bill Hickok.



Corporal John Taylor, one of "Custer's avengers," is bored and lonely. But his life and that of B Troop explodes in violence and tragedy when a single ill-chosen word by the local Indian agent sends a reservation's Sioux people on a desperate dash for Canada during a brutal Dakota winter, relentlessly pursued by a determined cavalry column.

B Troop:
One wrong word turned a Dakota winter into hell.

By James A. Janke

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11196.html?s=pdf

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.