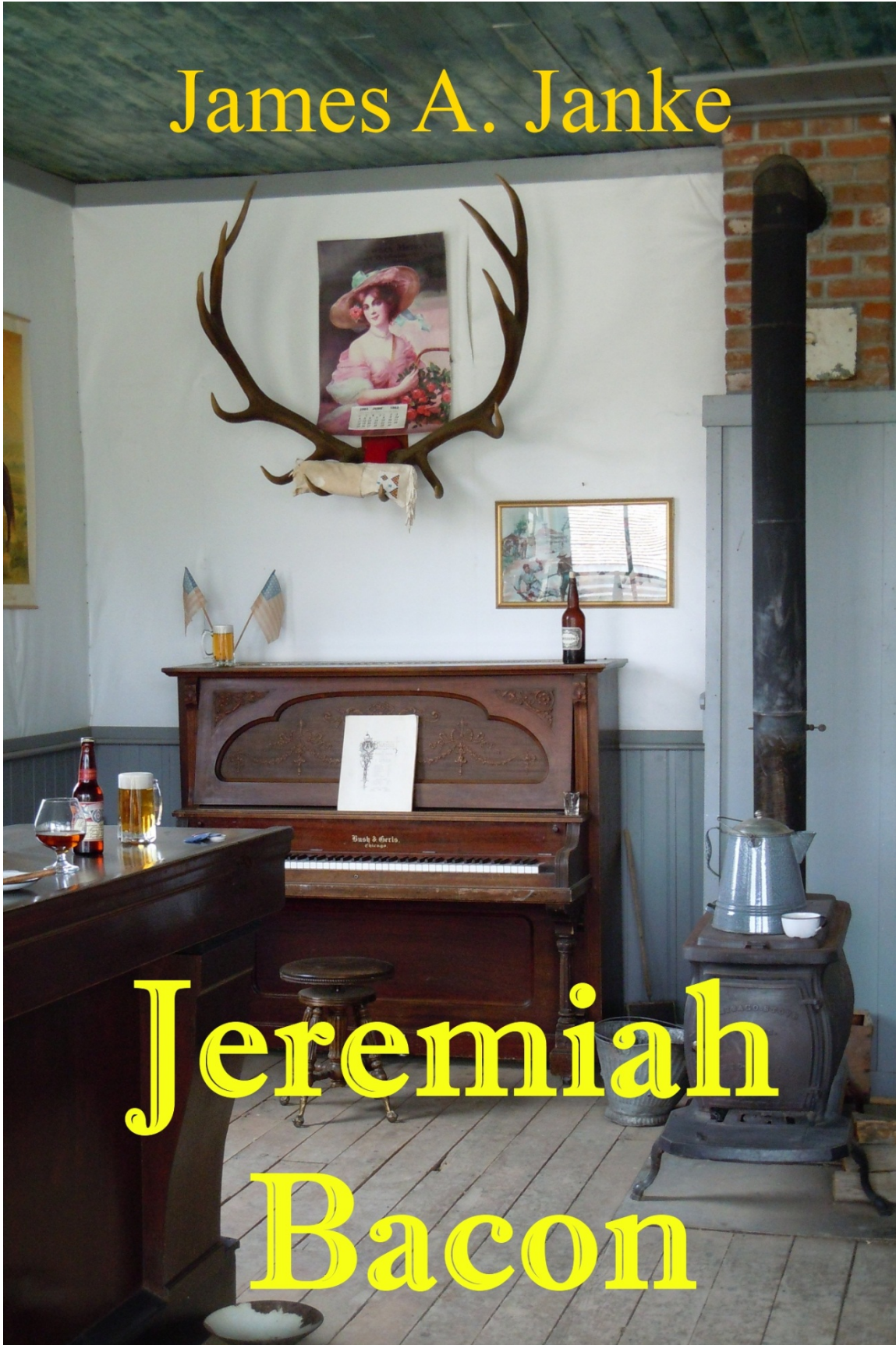


James A. Janke

Jeremiah
Bacon





Twenty-year-old Jeremiah Bacon has never fired a gun or even ridden a horse. Greenhorn adapts to the West to revenge his father's murder. He plunges into an entirely new world.

But it is his gunfighting lessons from Marshal Otis MacKenzie and his drive for vengeance that takes him into deadly conflict with the cold-blooded outlaws of the Red Desert Gang. He willingly puts his life at stake to avenge his father, but at the same time he also learns a lot about people and what's really important in life.

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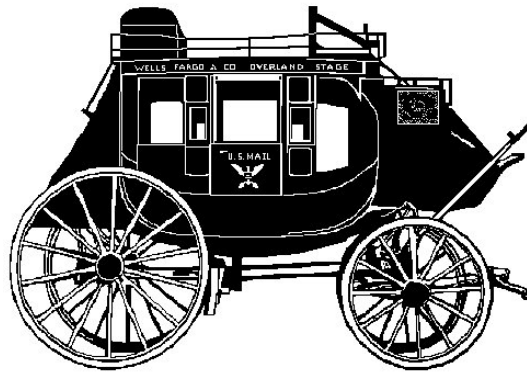
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Jeremiah Bacon



James A. Janke

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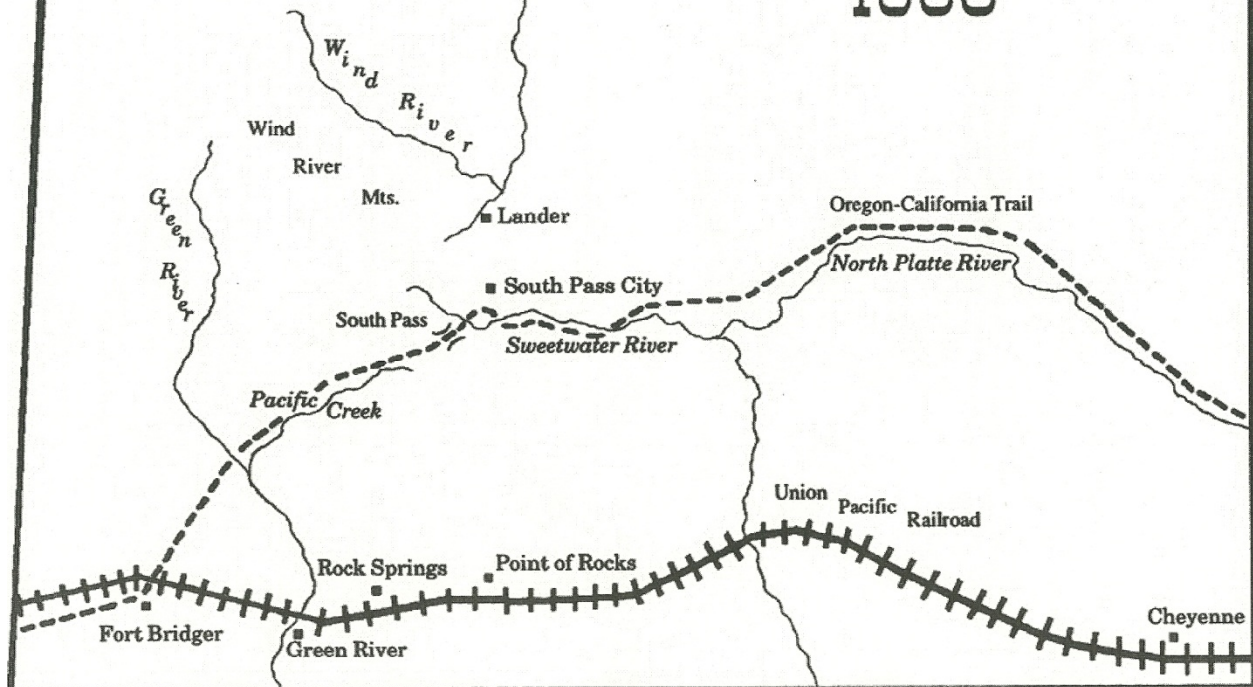
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Interior of the Carissa Saloon in South Pass City Historic Site, South Pass City, Wyoming, 2012.

<http://www.southpasscity.com/>

Dedicated to
Andrew and Laura

WYOMING TERRITORY 1880



Chapter One

Wednesday, June 15, 1880

Jeremiah Bacon rubbed his hands together to counter the night chill as he stepped down from the coach of the Union Pacific train. By the dim light emanating from the coach's windows, he could barely discern the large sign on the depot that said POINT OF ROCKS. Tugging at the bottom of his suit coat he walked over to where another man, similarly attired, was standing with his arms akimbo, staring up at the sky.

"You don't suppose Wyoming really has more stars than Boston, do you, son?" the older man asked, seeing Jeremiah approach.

"No, Father," Jeremiah said, chuckling. He glanced up at the sea of twinkling dots that sparkled from horizon to horizon. "Odd how the city lights and buildings in Boston keep you from really seeing the sky," he said, appreciative of the view.

"Yes," Matthew Bacon agreed. He took a deep breath. "How about a walk down the street," he suggested. "The conductor said we had about twenty minutes."

"Okay."

The two men crossed the short, dusty distance that separated the train station from the main street, which paralleled the tracks. They hesitated, debated their course, then headed to their right.

Matthew Bacon was tall and slim with nattily tailored clothes and a bowler. His erect posture and the carriage of his head, along with the touch of gray at his temples and in his carefully trimmed mustache and beard gave him a decidedly distinguished appearance.

His son was twenty, exactly half his age. The young man was an inch taller than his father, carried himself in the same manner, and tended to copy his father's wardrobe, though his own light brown hair was unconfined by a hat. An observer, suspecting a familial relationship between the two men, would be convinced by the identical slight dimples in their respective chins.

Neither man spoke as they strolled, both preoccupied with the novelty of the small western town. The buildings were either adobe or wood frame, usually with a wooden boardwalk in front of each and sometimes an overhanging roof. The street was quiet, no pedestrians were about, there was no traffic and very few lights.

They passed a general store, a dress shop, a hardware store, and a meat market. They peered over the batwing doors of the Bitter Creek Saloon and noted a few quiet customers, several slouching in chairs at tables, one propped up at the bar. A bored saloon girl in a red dress sauntered from one table to another; the bartender stood behind the bar, staring into space, slowly wiping a glass.

A dry goods store was next, then a saddlery, a furniture store, and a lawyer's office. Jeremiah and his father crossed the street and reversed directions, stopping to look at a single horse standing in the corral attached to a livery stable. A barbershop separated the livery from the marshal's office and jail. City hall was singularly unimpressive. A bank followed, then a confectioner's, a dry goods store, a restaurant, a gunsmith, and a bakery. More shops and offices, some empty, each striking the two men as crude and quaint compared to the vast edifices of the big eastern cities.

"Isn't it about time we got back, Father?" Jeremiah asked apprehensively, glancing back at the station, which they'd passed again.

"Oh, let's see," the older man said, pulling a gold watch from his pocket. With a click the cover popped open, but turn the watch as he might, Matthew Bacon could not read the time in the darkness. He looked about.

"Ah," he said, "there seems to be a light in this Wells Fargo office." He stepped up to a window and held the watch up to a sliver of light that crept around the edge of a shade. "Another five minutes," he announced. "Perhaps we should return."

He snapped the cover of the watch shut and inserted the timepiece into his pocket, casually peering into the office past the ill—fitting shade as he did so. Jeremiah noticed him suddenly freeze and then investigate more closely.

"Why— men with guns!" Matthew said, astonished.

"What?" Jeremiah asked. He started for the window himself.

"Yes," his father confirmed. "They seem to be pointing it at— Oh, my God!"

"What's wrong?" Jeremiah asked anxiously.

His father motioned him back. "They heard me," he gasped. "Get back!"

Jeremiah stood transfixed to the spot.

"Run, for God's sake!" Matthew commanded, pushing Jeremiah. Jeremiah turned and started running; his father was right behind him.

The door of the office rattled and then opened, banging up against the inside wall. Two men burst out and fell upon the Bacons before they were even away from the office.

"Run, Jeremiah!" Matthew shouted. He grappled with both the assailants, preventing them from reaching Jeremiah.

Jeremiah continued running. He looked back and saw his father being dragged inside the office as yet another figure darted out. The man pointed toward Jeremiah, a light flashed, and a bullet whizzed past Jeremiah's head just as he heard a loud bang. Jeremiah ducked between two buildings.

"Dammit, missed," Jeremiah heard the gunman snarl in a peculiar gravelly voice. "You two, after 'im," the man commanded. Two men started a chase.

Jeremiah felt his scalp crawl, and a surge of fear swept his body. He could hear the pursuers coming, the rapid clumping of their boots on the boardwalk like a drum roll at an execution. He ran wildly, one foot barely touching the ground before he was off on another bound.

Jeremiah was at a distinct disadvantage. The only other people around that he knew of were at the train station and the saloon— both in the opposite direction. The layout of the town was unfamiliar to him, but his pursuers could very well be residents.

He raced along the side of a building, his hands pushing off its surface as he plunged blindly toward the unknown area in the darkness ahead. He dodged between other buildings, ran through some scraggly bushes, and cut across yards. His legs pumped feverishly, his heart pounded so hard he thought it would tie itself into a knot, his lungs sucked air in short, wheezing gasps that clawed at his throat.

He saw a home that showed a light in the window, and he ran for that, hoping he'd be able to rouse its occupants. But as he reached the porch, he caught sight of the two men chasing him. If he raised the alarm they would shoot him down at the door. But he was exhausted; he could run no farther.

Jeremiah threw himself desperately among some bushes that grew alongside the house. He lay there gasping for air. The two pursuers came running up, one darting along the short picket fence that bordered part of the yard, the other stalking up to the lighted window. Jeremiah held his breath. Panting heavily, the man cautiously peered into the window.

"Is he there?" the man along the fence whispered.

"Nah," the man at the window answered disgustedly. With the barrel of his pistol he pushed the tip of his hat back, and Jeremiah saw his face in the illumination. It was gaunt and oval shaped, with a ragged black mustache and a couple of days' growth of beard. "Could've sworn I saw him come this way," the robber said. He looked around anxiously, searching the shadows.

"I don't like this," the other man complained. "That shot must've roused somebody."

"I don't like it either," the man at the window agreed, "Hell, Tom, let's get outta here."

"I'm for that." The two men ran from the yard and headed back toward the Wells Fargo office.

Thinking only of the danger his father must be in, Jeremiah forgot the probable safety of the house and hurried after the outlaws, keeping under cover. He soon found himself near the back of the Wells Fargo office, crouching apprehensively behind a barrel outside an adjacent building. He was torn between staying near his father and going for help.

A muffled report, followed quickly by two others, broke into Jeremiah's thoughts. He realized they must have been gunshots, and the thought made him nauseous. He started to tremble. The back door of the office

opened, and four men rushed out, ran to four horses tethered near the door, and threw themselves into their saddles.

Jeremiah shrank back farther into the shadows, and his frightened eyes followed the galloping animals through the choking dust raised by their hooves. One horse, a striking black with white stockings, stood out against the plain brown of the others.

Boots slapped against the flanks of horses, bridles clicked, and saddle leather creaked and complained as the men urged their mounts onward. With a heavy pounding of hooves, the four horsemen were quickly out of sight, and quiet returned.

Jeremiah bolted from behind the barrel and ran with fear to the back door of the Wells Fargo office. He plunged into the dark interior of the building and fumbled his way down a hall, using his hands for eyes. There were obviously several rooms to the building, but it was not long before Jeremiah was in the front office.

He shuddered. In the faint glow from the windows Jeremiah could make out the vague forms of two bodies, one crumpled up against the counter in the office, the other spread—eagled on the floor near the door.

He knelt by the nearest body, his lips trembling, and he whispered a soft "Father?" His hands explored the face of the man, a full fleshed face, with no beard. It was not Matthew Bacon. Jeremiah heard gurgling sounds escape the man's throat.

Jeremiah crept on his hands and knees over to the supine figure that he knew had to be his father. With a trembling hand he reached for the man's face, and the facial hair he touched confirmed his worst fears. "Oh, my God!" he gasped. "Father!" His fingers sought the man's jugular vein, but there was no sign of a pulse. Jeremiah ran his hand down his father's chest. "Father, Father," he sobbed, fighting back tears.

He froze, sucking in his breath as his hand slipped through a warm fluid that had collected on the vest of Matthew Bacon. Jeremiah raised his hand and felt its palm with the other hand. "Oh, Jesus in heaven" he said in anguish.

He rose to his feet and reached into his pocket to remove his handkerchief. Grimacing, he wiped the blood off his hand and then stepped gingerly over his father's body and headed for the front door. He fumbled for the door knob, then threw the door wide open. He rushed out onto the boardwalk and paused at the edge.

"Help," he said feebly, the lump in his throat choking off his voice. Then he gathered his strength and screamed "Help! Murder!" He ran into the street. "Help!"

Jeremiah saw a man running his way, the tails of an unbuttoned shirt flapping behind him, a holster held in his left hand, and a pistol in his right. Jeremiah ran to meet him.

"I heard shots," the man said. "What's happened?"

"Help me," Jeremiah pleaded, grabbing the man's right arm.

The man jerked his arm away. "Let go of my gun hand, you idiot," he scolded.

Jeremiah was startled by the rebuff. He stared at the man, trying to formulate a reply. "My father," he said, pleading. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the Wells Fargo office.

The other man's tone softened. "Show me," he said simply. He nudged Jeremiah's shoulder with the flat of his pistol.

"Over here," Jeremiah said, and he turned and ran for the office, glancing back to make sure the man continued to trot after him. Jeremiah ran into the office and knelt down by his father, picking up a still hand in his own.

The other man ran up to the office door, but he hid behind the door frame and peered into the dark office.

"In here," Jeremiah insisted.

"I didn't get to be forty-three in my job by rushing blindly into dark buildings, mister," the man said.

"Oh," Jeremiah replied. "Uh— they left," he said. "Four of them— on horses they had in back."

Finally the man entered and knelt down on the other side of Matthew Bacon's body.

"He's been shot," Jeremiah said. "He's hurt bad," he continued, refusing to believe the worst.

The other man felt for life signs, then took a deep breath and gave a sigh. "I'm sorry," he said. "Your father's dead."

Dead! That couldn't be, it just couldn't be! They were just walking down the street together. Just talking with each other. It was just not possible. Jeremiah clutched his father's hand in both of his, holding it close to his chest. "Oh, merciful God," he pleaded.

A murmur came from the wounded man lying near the counter.

"Who's that?"

"I don't know," Jeremiah answered. "They shot him along with--" He couldn't finish.

"Could use some light in here," the man said, rising to his feet. Jeremiah heard the gun being slipped into its holster, the slap of the leather against a hip, and the click of a buckle. The man walked to the side of the room and then stopped. A burst of light lit up the room as a match hissed into flame. He turned around. "Oh, Jesus," he said.

Jeremiah saw what the man really looked like for the first time. A large barrel-chested man, with huge hands. His head was square shaped, topped by a disheveled crop of brown hair that lapped his collar. He had a broad nose and slightly bushy eyebrows and sideburns. Jeremiah had never seen a countenance that conveyed authority like this man's did. He was not surprised to see the star shaped badge on the man's shirt.

"Cyrus," the lawman said, kneeling down. "It's me, Otis MacKenzie."

The man on the floor tried to speak, but only pitiful gasps and groans issued from his mouth.

"Did you see them, Cyrus?" the marshal asked. "Did you recognize any of them?"

"Cow—"

"Cowhand?" Otis said. "One of them was a cowhand?"

"Ye—"

"What ranch was he from, Cyrus?"

There was no answer.

"Cyrus?" MacKenzie checked for a pulse, then a heartbeat. He patted the dead man's shoulder. "So long, Cyrus, old friend."

A woman screamed in the office. Otis whirled and saw a woman in a long traveling coat standing in the doorway, her hands to the side of her head, horror on her face.

"Mother," Jeremiah said in anguish, looking up at her.

Priscilla Bacon screamed her husband's name and sank to her knees at his side. Her hands floated over his body, desperately wanting to touch him, but repulsed by the ugly red stain on his chest. Then she broke into deep body-shaking sobs and flung herself on the man, cradling his head in her hands.

"Mother," Jeremiah repeated softly. He put his hands on her shaking shoulders, but he felt absolutely helpless. He looked up at the marshal beseechingly. The lawman, busily tucking his buttoned shirt into his pants, seemed equally at a loss.

Otis went out the door and spoke to the gawking spectators who had gathered, sending first one and then another off on errands. He turned back to the Bacon family, but he realized there was nothing he could do. While he waited, he made a cursory inspection of the open safe in the office and noted that its contents had been removed.

A portly woman in a simple cotton dress and shawl waddled with much huffing and puffing into the Wells Fargo office.

"Mrs. Munford," the marshal said, greeting her. "Could you be of some assistance here?" he asked. But the question was unnecessary. Thelma Munford had been raised on the frontier and had seen much of her family, including her parents and husband, and neighbors struck down by Indians, outlaws, starvation, and disease. Familiarity with tragedy breeds only acceptance, not insensitivity. She knelt down beside the prostrate widow and put a comforting hand on her shoulder, saying nothing, for nothing could be said.

A wagon drew up in front of the office. The crowd parted, and a man entered reverently. "Marshal," he said simply.

Mrs. Munford saw the man enter, and she spoke to Priscilla Bacon. "My dear," she said, starting to lift the other woman away. "They've come for your husband."

"No, no," Priscilla refused.

"Life is hard," Mrs. Munford soothed "We must accept these things. We don't have to understand them or like them, but we have to accept them. Come," she repeated, pulling more forcefully, "let the men do their duty."

Jeremiah stood up and glanced at the man who had entered.

"Taylor Pierce," the marshal explained. "Town undertaker. He'll see to your father."

Jeremiah nodded. He returned to his mother and helped Mrs. Munford get her to her feet.

"Cry your heart out, dear," Mrs. Munford said, enfolding the much smaller woman in her great arms. "It helps the soul."

Pierce crooked a finger at several men in the doorway. Quickly and silently they came in, picked up the body of Cyrus and carried it out to the wagon. Just as quickly they returned and did the same with the body of Matthew Bacon. The undertaker tipped his hat solemnly to Jeremiah and left.

"Mrs. Munford," Otis said, "could these people stay with you for the night. They're in mighty great need of comfortin'."

"Of course, Marshal," she agreed. "Come along—" She paused. "What's the poor woman's name, Marshal?"

"Priscilla Bacon, m'am," Jeremiah volunteered. He turned to the marshal. "My name is Jeremiah Bacon. My father is— Matthew Bacon."

"Come, Priscilla," Mrs. Munford said, leading her out of the office. "You'll stay at my home." The two women left the office and proceeded down the boardwalk, Priscilla murmuring protests, but helpless in her grief.

"You must've come in on the train," Otis said to Jeremiah.

"Yes, sir," Jeremiah confirmed. "My father and I went for a walk," he explained in a muted voice. "He saw the men in this office and they saw him. They came out, seized him, and chased me. I eluded the ones chasing me and came back here. I heard shots. The men rode away and I ran in and found—" He waved his hand over the floor. In the distance he could still faintly hear the clopping of the horse's hooves and the creaking of the wagon.

"What'd they look like?"

"I only saw one man's face. Kind of oblong, thin. He had black hair and a mustache. Rather short, too."

"Doesn't help a whole lot," the marshal said, rubbing his chin. "Could be one of a number of fellows, I'm afraid."

"I'd recognize him if I saw him again," Jeremiah said firmly. "Oh, he called one of the other men Tom."

"Tom? Pretty common name, but it's more than we had before. Anything else?"

"The leader had a peculiar voice, sort of gruff, forced, scratchy."

"Voices are pretty hard to recognize from someone else's description," Otis commented, "but it sounds like a description I've heard before."

"One of the horses was black with white feet," Jeremiah added.

"That's not a real common type, might be real helpful. Anything else?"

Jeremiah shook his head.

"Well," Otis said, sighing. "It's too dark to track 'em now. I'll get a posse and start after 'em at first light. 'Bout five hours from now."

Jeremiah nodded.

"You ought to go be near your mother, son," the marshal suggested. "Did you have any baggage?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll have it taken off the train and sent to Mrs. Munford's."

"Thank you."

Chapter Two

Thursday, June 16, 1880

Otis MacKenzie took off his hat and beat it against his pants to remove as much of the dust as possible. He stepped onto the porch of Mrs. Munford's small, white frame home on the northern edge of town, near the gray sandstone cliffs that bordered Point of rocks. The silence struck him. Mrs. Munford had apparently shooed her three kids, the last of eight still at home, off to somewhere else to allow the Bacons some peace and quiet.

Mrs. Munford received him at the door and led him into the parlor, where Priscilla and Jeremiah were both sitting. Then she returned to the kitchen.

Somewhat awkwardly the marshal stood in front of the two people. "I'm sorry," he said. "We followed their trail clear up to Emmons Cone, but they scattered there. We split up, too, but each of the trails disappeared. We lost 'em."

"You've done all you could, Marshal," Priscilla Bacon said softly. "We thank you. Please sit down." She motioned with a hand.

The marshal sat down in an easy chair. "There's always the chance that the men may still be caught, m'am," he said. He studied the widow, not having remembered much about her from the previous night. Fine features on her oval shaped face, her light brown hair tied back in a bun. A dainty rounded nose over perfectly proportioned lips that revealed a set of even white teeth when they parted. Slim yet full figured. A comely woman, indeed. Her eyes seemed the more tragic for it, since she'd obviously been crying a great deal.

"Yes," the woman commented. "Mrs. Munford mentioned that the men were probably members of the Red Desert Gang, as she called them."

"That's right, m'am," the marshal agreed. "And they seem to stick around this area, have for a number of years, so there's a good chance we'll run into 'em again and catch the murderers."

"I dearly hope so, Marshal," she said. "By the way, we have another clue that may help you. In preparing my husband for burial we discovered that his watch was gone. His murderers must have taken it."

"What did it look like?"

"It was gold. I gave it to him on our wedding day. The date is inscribed on the cover— June second, eighteen fifty-eight."

"Good, I'll keep an eye out for it."

"Mrs. Munford said the other man murdered was the Wells Fargo agent," Priscilla stated.

"Yes, m'am."

"What was he doing there at that time of night?"

"A shipment of greenbacks and coins had come in on the train Tuesday. It was scheduled to go up to Atlantic City on today's stage, to be exchanged for gold dust and bullion from the mines. The agent was staying at the office overnight to guard the shipment; he did that often."

"Why weren't you guarding it?" Jeremiah asked, speaking for the first time.

"That was his job," Otis said, sensing an implied accusation of dereliction of duty. "Besides, Cyrus Kessler was as capable of defendin' that money as I would 've been. He spent eighteen years in the cavalry, went through some of the fiercest fightin' in the War Between the States and then spent a decade fightin' Indians before he quit and took the job here. He was as handy with a gun as I am and probably twice as tough in a fight."

"I'm surprised a man of action like that would have taken so sedentary a position as that of a Wells Fargo agent," Priscilla commented.

"It was his wife, m'am," he explained. "She tired of the army life, wanted to settle down. So—"

"Mrs. Munford said that Mr. Kessler was a widower," Priscilla said, puzzled.

"Yes, m'am. His wife was killed soon after they got to Point of Rocks."

"Oh— an awful shame."

Otis noted that she said it with genuine sympathy, not as a polite, reflexive response.

"This must all be very hard for the daughter," Priscilla judged. "Anita, I believe Mrs. Munford said."

"Yes, m'am," the marshal said. "Anita Kessler."

"Will you see her today?"

"Yes, I believe I will."

"Please extend our sympathy to her, the poor child," Priscilla said.

"I sure will, m'am," Otis agreed. "She'll appreciate the gesture."

There was a lull in the conversation. "Uh— I suppose you'll be leavin' soon after the funeral tomorrow," Otis said, trying to make conversation.

"No," Jeremiah said firmly.

"No?" the marshal asked, surprised.

"Not until my father's murderers are brought to justice," Jeremiah vowed.

"Well," Otis said, glancing uncomfortably at Priscilla. "That could be some time, m'am," he said awkwardly.

"We're staying," Jeremiah reaffirmed.

Priscilla patted his hand lovingly. "Now, now, Jeremiah," she chided. She turned again to the lawman. "Actually, Marshal MacKenzie, I am inclined to agree with my son, temporarily at least. You see, we were heading for San Francisco, where Matthew had secured a position at the symphony and at the University of California in Oakland. He was a superb violinist."

"I see."

"Now there is no reason for us to continue on to San Francisco or to return to Boston."

"Surely there is some family, some friends."

"There is no family, and we would be imposing on friends. More importantly, tomorrow my heart will be planted in Point of Rocks along with the body of my husband. I find it difficult myself to consider leaving, at least for a while."

"But how will you get along?" Otis asked. "I don't mean to pry, but have you any money?"

"An item which we have in short supply, I'm afraid, sir," she admitted. "It will be necessary for me to find gainful employment."

Otis glanced at the healthy young man at her side. "Seems to me, m'am," he suggested, "that the boy there should be the one lookin' for a job."

"I intend to find work, Marshal," Jeremiah said hastily.

"Marshal MacKenzie," Priscilla broke in, noting the increasingly belligerent tone in both men's voices. "I must explain. Jeremiah," she said, grasping her son's hands, "has a rare talent for the piano. He plans on becoming a concert pianist. My husband's position would have allowed Jeremiah to enter the College of Fine Arts at the University this fall term. Now that seems improbable, but I will devote my life to see that his ambition is still achieved, that his plans for further education are realized as soon as possible. Of course, for now it will be necessary for him to work, also," she conceded, "but any employment that he might find must be strictly temporary and not injurious to his hands."

Otis raised an eyebrow.

"Mother," Jeremiah said, somewhat embarrassed in front of the rugged man sitting across from them. "I'll have to take what work I can find. The piano must be of secondary importance until Father's murderers are found."

"Oh, shush, Jeremiah," his mother scolded. "I'll not hear of your abandoning the piano. Your father's death must not also be the demise of your future."

Otis liked the way Priscilla Bacon talked. She was obviously educated, yet she did not flaunt her education. She wasn't trying to be a snob; that was simply the way she talked.

"No, Jeremiah," his mother said. "These hands were made for great things." She squeezed his hands. "I'll do whatever is necessary, here in Point of Rocks and later in San Francisco, to see them fulfill their destiny. I'd be so proud, and so would your father." She looked admiringly at her son.

Otis was deeply impressed. Pride, dignity, intelligence, manners, devotion, compassion, she had it all. He searched for a word for what she had. Class. That was it. She had class.

"Well," he said, "I speak for the whole town when I say you are both welcome here. And you'll find the people helpful and friendly."

"Thank you, Marshal," she said.

"Well," Otis said, "I've got to be goin'." He rose and started to back away.

"Marshal MacKenzie," Jeremiah addressed him.

"Yes?" Otis stopped.

"If the Red Desert Gang has been operating in this area for several years, why haven't you caught its members by now?" The displeasure in his voice was unmistakable.

"Now just a minute—" Otis said, raising a finger. He felt on the defensive again.

"Jeremiah," Priscilla virtually snapped. "You are being rude and unfair. I'm sure the marshal has done all he could."

Jeremiah thought over the last night. How his grief had crushed him, a heavy pressure on his chest, a hollowness in his stomach, an aching in his throat and head. And then it had been supplanted by a new emotion, an emotion he hadn't realized he could feel with such intensity. Anger. Anger and hate. Whereas the piano had been his only interest up till now, henceforth he would be ruled by a new passion—vengeance.

"I want them dead," Jeremiah said sternly. "I want them caught and executed."

"You're not alone in that desire, Mr. Bacon," Otis readily agreed, irritated.

"You can depend on me for any help you need, Marshal," Jeremiah offered, "but if you can't do the job I'll do it myself. And I'll have no mercy for them."

"Nor they for you," Otis warned. His resentment turned to pity suddenly. How many times had he seen fiery young men turn themselves into righteous avengers, only to end up maimed or dead. But he understood the young man's anger. "You'll only get yourself hurt— or killed," he said sympathetically. "Let me handle it."

"Of course he will, Marshal," Priscilla said, alarmed. "Jeremiah, I'll not tolerate any such talk on your part."

Jeremiah fell silent and sullen.

Otis started to back up again, unsure how to break off the conversation, which had turned decidedly unpleasant. "Mrs. Bacon," he said simply, nodding. "Mr. Bacon."

"Thank you for stopping by, Marshal," Priscilla replied graciously.

Chapter Three

Friday, June 17, 1880

The sun beat straight down as the large group of somber figures clustered around the two gravesites in the cemetery outside of Point of Rocks.

"We are gathered here to lay to rest the remains of two beloved brethren," the Reverend Crockett said. "Two good men cut down in the prime of life by cold-blooded assassins. Evil people so in love with the material wealth of this world that they would destroy the real wealth of the world— its good people."

Jeremiah listened absently to the man speak. He was staring at the simple wooden box that lay on the ground next to the heap of dirt that had been scooped out of the earth. Incredible that his father, having been a warm, loving human being just two days earlier, should be lying in that box.

"...a loving wife..." Jeremiah glanced up at his mother who stood beside him. She wore the same blue dress in which she had arrived in Point of Rocks, but a large black shawl covered her shoulders. Her head was bowed, her eyes closed, a tear on each cheek. She held a Bible close to her bosom, grasping it so tightly that her knuckles were white.

"...a devoted daughter..." On the other side of the two graves stood Anita Kessler, a young woman, dressed in black, her head bowed, heavily veiled, her hands folded in front of her.

Jeremiah also noted the young man standing close to her, a deputy marshal's badge affixed to his vest. He was tall and lean, with black hair and a wispy mustache on a lip overhung by a pointed nose that seemed to reach for an equally jutting chin. He had a heavy shadow to his face, and thick black hair swept from under his shirt sleeves to flow over his hands and fingers, which had rolled up the brim of the hat held in front of him.

"...brought to swift justice..." Jeremiah glanced over at Otis MacKenzie, who shifted his feet, apparently aware of Jeremiah's accusing stare.

"...ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." Jeremiah pondered the transitory nature of a man's life.

"...I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He restoreth..." His father was at peace, but Jeremiah was certain he could never be at peace with himself until the murderers of his father were also dead.

"Amen." The minister nodded toward the crowd, and four men came forward. They picked up the ends of two pieces of rope on which the coffin of Matthew Bacon lay and lifted the box into the air. Straining in the heat, they maneuvered the box over the open grave and then started lowering it slowly, letting it pass out of sight.

Jeremiah was startled as his mother started singing.

"All men living are but mortal,
Yea, all flesh must fade as grass,
Only thro' death's gloomy portal
To eternal life we pass."

The men with the ropes stopped the descent and looked up at the minister, fearful they'd made a mistake. The minister, equally confused, looked first at Priscilla and then at the men again. He motioned for them to continue.

Jeremiah looked at his mother in surprise. Her eyes were still closed, and her head swayed slowly from side to side. Her voice cracked in the beginning, but it picked up strength as she went on. His father had always been proud of his wife's singing, and Jeremiah saw this as his mother's parting tribute to her husband.

"This frail body here must perish
Ere the heav'nly joys it cherish,

Ere it gain the free reward
For the ransomed of the Lord."

The lump in Jeremiah's throat felt like it would break through the walls of his neck. Never had he heard such heart-rending singing. He looked around the crowd. All eyes were on Priscilla, even those of Anita Kessler. Several women dabbed at their eyes, and Jeremiah even noticed the marshal blink rapidly several times.

The men finished lowering the coffin into the grave, and two of them dropped their ends of the ropes while the other two pulled up briskly. Quickly they went to the other coffin, and soon it too sank out of sight. The box thudded softly as it touched the bottom of the hole. Again ropes were withdrawn, the rasping of the fiber on the edges of the coffin echoing in the cavity with a grim finality.

"Thus before the throne so glorious,
Now ye stand a soul victorious,
Gazing on that joy for aye,
That shall never pass away.
Amen."

Priscilla's voice finished strong now, clear and crisp. The crowd was motionless. Jeremiah could taste a salty liquid as it trickled into the side of his mouth, and he unobtrusively wiped away the tears with the back of his hand.

"Jeremiah," his mother said, "your arm, please."

"Yes, Mother," he said, quickly extending his arm for her to hold. They started down the dusty path that led to the town, and the rest of the crowd began dispersing as well. From back at the gravesite Jeremiah heard the chink of shovels as they bit into the mounds of dirt, and then he heard the hollow sounding *thunk* as each shovel hit the wooden lids of the coffins.

"The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away," Reverend Crockett said to Mrs. Munford as the two of them watched Priscilla and Jeremiah descend the path. "But the agony and pathos in that woman's voice must have given Him second thoughts."

"Yes, Reverend," Mrs. Munford said. "An angel, an angel." She blew her nose gently. "You will come by the house, won't you?" she asked. "Both families will be there."

"Of course, Mrs. Munford," he assured her. "Of course."

The people at Mrs. Munford's stood in small groups, talking softly over coffee and sandwiches. Everyone expressed their sympathy to Anita and to the Bacons, even though they didn't know the latter.

Mrs. Munford introduced Anita Kessler to Jeremiah and his mother. Jeremiah was immediately taken by the young woman. Her black hair formed a frame of tight curls about a round face with cheeks that had a natural fresh rosiness to them and with large, dark brown eyes. She had a short rounded nose and an unusually wide mouth that enhanced the allure of her lovely lips. The somber black dress did not detract in the least from her fine figure.

The three people, though strangers, talked easily, for they had suffered a common calamity, and it had instantly forged a bond between them. They were engaged in a subdued conversation when Marshal MacKenzie approached them, his huge right hand encompassing a coffee cup, from which he sipped occasionally.

After they had accepted his renewed words of sympathy, Anita Kessler informed him of the new accommodations for Priscilla.

"Priscilla has accepted my invitation to come live with me, as you suggested, Marshal," she said.

"Splendid," he replied. "I'm sure the two of you will be good company for each other. Mrs. Munford would love to have you here, Mrs. Bacon, but a house full of kids might not be the best for you."

"I'm very grateful for Anita's offer," Priscilla said, "and I'm sure we will get along fine. However, there is still the matter of a living place for Jeremiah."

"Oh, well, I thought he could stay at the jail," Otis suggested.

"The jail!" Priscilla exclaimed, astonished.

"Oh, a temporary arrangement until something more suitable comes along," he quickly added.

"Would I sleep in a cell?" Jeremiah asked.

"Yes, but the door would be left open." He looked at Priscilla. "No one would think he was under arrest or anything," he assured the concerned woman.

"Still, sleeping in a jail," she said skeptically.

"It might be interesting, Mother," Jeremiah volunteered.

"M'am," the marshal argued, "I sleep there."

"Well," she said, distressed at having offended the lawman, "I guess it's satisfactory. As long as it's temporary."

"Of course," Otis acknowledged.

"I can bring my things over later today, Marshal," Jeremiah said.

"Fine." The marshal shifted the cup to his other hand. "I've also thought of a possible job for you, son."

"Oh?" both Priscilla and Jeremiah said.

"Yes, and it allows you to keep practicing the piano."

"That's wonderful, Marshal," Priscilla said excitedly.

"Well, the Bitter Creek Saloon needs a piano player for nights—"

"What!" Priscilla exclaimed. "My son playing piano in a— a saloon. Really, Marshal, it's too much."

Otis was taken aback. "It's honest work, m'am. And the saloon has the only piano in town."

"That's right, Priscilla," Anita confirmed.

"Oh, but really," Priscilla scoffed.

"It can't be so bad, Mother," Jeremiah said. "It will provide some money, and the piano is important."

"If your father could see you—" She paused, weighing the matter. "You have us at a disadvantage, Marshal MacKenzie."

"Yes, m'am," he allowed.

"I'll take the job, Marshal," Jeremiah announced.

His mother did not protest, resigned to the situation. "But it's only temporary, until more appropriate employment is found," she set as a condition.

"Of course," Otis agreed. "I'll take you over to the saloon about nine tonight," he said to Jeremiah.

"Good," the young man returned. "I'll be ready."

Otis smiled at the three people. Anita Kessler. How proud Cyrus had been of her. Capable, she ran the agency probably more than he had. And pretty and charming. No wonder his deputy as well as most of the other young men in the Sweetwater region was chasing her. Priscilla Bacon. The first woman he'd ever met that he felt awed by. Something really extraordinary about her. And that singing. Nothing had ever touched him as much as that had. Jeremiah Bacon. He liked the way the young man stood, straight shouldered, erect, proud. And he didn't turn away if you looked him straight in the eye. But also headstrong and impulsive and likely to get himself killed if he was allowed to pursue his quest for vengeance. A potential tragedy and additional blow to his mother.

"Well," Otis said, finishing the last sip of the coffee. "I have some things to do. I'll be talkin' to each of you."

The trio said goodbye to the marshal, and he left the group, to be replaced immediately by three other men.

"Anita," the spokesman said, "our deepest sympathy. You know how we loved your father."

"Thank you, gentleman," Anita said.

"And would you introduce us to the Bacons, please," he added.

Anita nodded. "Mrs. Priscilla Bacon and her son, Jeremiah," she began. "This is Mr. Henkleman, owner of the Point of Rocks general store and mayor of the city."

"My sympathy to both of you," Henkleman said.

"Thank you," Priscilla said. Jeremiah nodded.

"This is Mr. Osborne," Anita continued. "He's owner of the local bank and chairman of the school board." Osborne extended his condolences. "And the Reverend Crockett you already know," Anita said, finishing the introductions.

"Of course," Priscilla acknowledged. "Thank you for the kind words at the funeral, Reverend."

"I hope I was able to give you some comfort."

"You did. Thank you."

"Mrs. Bacon," Henkleman said. "The marshal has informed us that you intend to stay in Point of Rocks for a while, is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"And he also mentioned that you would be seeking employment."

"Yes," Priscilla repeated.

"The marshal suggested that you were an educated lady?" Osborne asked, seeking confirmation.

"I have had a year of college," Priscilla stated.

"Fine," Osborne said. "Well, Point of Rocks needs a teacher for its children for the fall, and we would like to offer the position to you."

"Why, I'm flattered, gentlemen," Priscilla said, taken aback.

"Mother," Jeremiah encouraged, "you've always been interested in teaching."

"You'll accept the offer?" Osborne asked.

Priscilla debated, then decided quickly. "I accept."

"Good, good," Osborne said, nodding.

"Of course," Henkleman interjected, "school doesn't start until fall. However, I could use someone to help me with the bookkeeping and accounts in the store. Are you good with figures, Mrs. Bacon?"

"I'd say I have a fairly good command of the subject, Mr. Henkleman," she said confidently. "I'm sure I could handle it— with a little help in the beginning."

"You may start whenever you like," the man said.

"Thank you, thank you all," Priscilla said gratefully. "You have eased my mind a considerable amount. I— I am simply overwhelmed by the generosity and by the concern everyone is showing for us, by your help, your offers."

Reverend Crockett spoke up. "I, also, would like to make an offer," he said, "but mine comes without monetary remuneration. However, I think you could find it profitable nonetheless."

"Oh?" she asked, curious.

"The Good Book," the minister said, remembering Priscilla's Bible, "is a great comfort, but even more comforting is being with people who care for you and who can share your burden of sorrow. I speak for the entire congregation when I ask the two of you to join us in worship on Sunday and on every Sunday."

"We'd love to have you come," Anita put in.

"Of course, we'll be there," Priscilla said. "And thank you for inviting us."

"And— well—" the minister said haltingly, "could we impose upon you to sing at the service for us?"

"Me?"

"Your voice, madam," he gushed, "the depths of feeling, the expression of the soul, the fineness of the voice— a hymn of your choice, naturally."

Priscilla smiled. "I'd be honored to sing at your service," she said.

"It is we who are honored. And God bless you."

The three men expressed their sympathy once more and then departed.

"Mother," Jeremiah said slowly, "I am amazed at the number of nice people there are in this town."

"I quite agree, son," Priscilla said. She turned to Anita. "I am deeply touched by the way so many people have rushed to the assistance of two perfect strangers."

Anita smiled. "You won't be strangers long," she said.



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