



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1893

Wind rips through the crags a thousand feet above, nothing moving in this godforsaken town, and the mule skinner knows that something is wrong. Two miles south stands Bartholomew Packer's mine, the Godsend, a twenty-stamp mill that should be filling this box canyon with the thudding racket of the rock crushers pulverizing ore. The sound of the stamps in operation is the sound of money being made, and only two things will stop them—Christmas and tragedy.

He dismounts his albino steed, the horse's pinked nostrils flaring, dirty mane matted with ice. The single-rig saddle is snow-crusted as well, its leather and cloth components—the mochila and shabrack—frozen stiff. He rubs George's neck, speaking in soft, low tones he knows will calm the animal, telling him he did a good day's work and that a warm stable awaits with feed and fresh water.

The mule skinner opens his wallet, collects the pint of busthead he bought at a bodega in Silverton, and swallows the remaining mouthful, whiskey crashing into his empty stomach like iced fire.

He wades through waist-deep snow to the mercantile, bangs his shop-mades on the door frame. Inside, the lamps have been extinguished and the big stove squats dormant in the corner, unattended

by the usual constellation of miners jawboning over coffee and tobacco. He calls for the owner as he crosses the board floor, moving between shelves, past stacked crates and burlap sacks bulging with sugar and flour.

“Jessup? It’s Brady! You in back?”

No one answers.

The twelve burros crane their scrawny necks in his direction when Brady emerges from the merc. He reaches into his greatcoat, pulls out a tin of Star Navy tobacco, and shoves a chaw between lips and gums gone blackish purple in the last year.

“What the hell?” he whispers.

When he delivered supplies two weeks ago, this little mining town was bustling. Now Abandon looms listless before him in the gloom of late afternoon, streets empty, snow banked high against the unshoveled plank sidewalks, no tracks as far as he can see.

The cabins scattered across the lower slopes lie buried to their chimneys, and with not a one of them smoking, the air smells too clean.

Brady is a man at home in solitude, often spending days on the trail, alone in wild, quiet places, but this silence is all wrong—a lie. He feels menaced by it, and with each passing moment, more certain that something has happened here.

A wall of dark clouds scrapes over the peaks, and snowflakes begin to speck the sleeves of his slicker. Here comes the wind. Chimes clang over the doorway of the merc. It will be night soon.

He makes his way up the street into the saloon, still half-expecting Joss Maddox, the striking barkeep, to assault him with some gloriously profane greeting. No one’s there. Not the mute piano player, not a single customer, and again, no light from the kerosene lamps, no warmth from the potbellied stove, just a half-filled glass on the pine bar, the beer frozen through.

The path to the nearest cabin lies beneath untrodden snow, and without webs, it takes five minutes to cover a hundred yards.

He pounds his gloved fist against the door. No one answers. The latch string hasn’t been pulled in, and despite the circumstance, he still feels like a trespasser as he steps inside uninvited.

In the dark, his eyes strain to adjust.

Around the base of a potted spruce tree, crumpled pages of newspaper clutter the dirt floor—remnants of Christmas.

Food languishes untouched on a rustic table, far too lavish to be any ordinary meal for the occupants of this cramped one-room cabin. This was Christmas dinner.

He removes a glove, touches the ham—cold and hard as ore. A pot sits there, the beans frozen in their broth. The cake feels more like pumice than sponge, and two jagged glass stems still stand upright, the wine having frozen and shattered the crystal cups.



Outside again, back with his pack train, he shouts, turning slowly in the middle of the street so the words carry in all directions.

“Anyone here?”

His voice and the fading echo of it sound so small rising against the vast, indifferent sweep of wilderness. The sky dims. Snow falls harder. The church at the north end of town disappears in the storm.

It’s twenty-seven miles back to Silverton, and the pack train has been on the trail since before first light. The burros need rest. Having driven mules the last sixteen hours, he needs it, too, though the prospect of spending the night in Abandon, in this awful silence, unnerves him.

As he slips a boot into the stirrup, ready to take the burros down to the stables, he notices something beyond the cribs at the south end of town. He urges George forward, trots through deep powder between the false-fronted buildings, and when he sees what caught his eye, he whispers, “You old fool.”

Just a snowman scowling at him, spindly arms made of spruce branches, pinecones for teeth and eyes, garland for a crown.

He tugs the reins, turning George back toward town, and the jolt of seeing her provokes, “Lord God Amighty.”

He drops his head, tries to allay the thumping of his heart in the thin air. When he looks up again, the young girl is still there, per-

haps six or seven, apparition-pale and just ten feet away, with locomotive-black curls and coal eyes to match—so dark and with such scant delineation between iris and pupil, they more resemble wet stones.

“You put a fright in me,” he says. “What are you doin out here all alone?”

She backpedals.

“Don’t be scart. I ain’t the bogeyman.” Brady alights, wades toward her through the snow. With the young girl in webs sunk only a foot in powder, and the mule skinner to his waist, he thinks it odd to stand eye-to-eye with a child.

“You all right?” he asks. “I didn’t think there was nobody here.” The snowflakes stand out like white confetti in the child’s hair.

“They’re all gone,” she says, no emotion, no tears, just an unaffected statement of fact.

“Even your ma and pa?” She nods.

“Where’d they all go to? Can you show me?”

She takes another step back, reaches into her gray woolen cloak. The single-action army revolver is a heavy sidearm, and it sags comically in the child’s hand, so she holds it like a rifle. Brady is too surprised to do a thing but watch as she struggles with the hammer.

“Okay, I’ll show you,” she says, the hammer locked back, sighting him up, her small finger already in the trigger guard.

“Now hold on. Wait just a—”

“Stay still.”

“That ain’t no toy to point in someone’s direction. It’s for—”

“Killin. I know. You’ll feel better directly.”

As Brady scrambles for a way to rib up this young girl to hand him the gun, he hears its report ricocheting through the canyon, finds himself lying on his back, surrounded by a wall of snow.

In the oval of gray winter sky, the child’s face appears, looking down at him.

What in God’s—

“It made a hole in your neck.”

He attempts to tell her to stable George and the burros, see that they’re fed and watered. After all the work they put in today, they

deserve at least that. Only gurgles emerge, and when he tries to breathe, his throat whistles.

She points the revolver at his face again, one eye closed, the barrel slightly quivering, a parody of aiming.

He stares up into the deluge of snowflakes, the sky already immersed in a bluish dusk that seems to deepen before his eyes, and he wonders, Is the day really fading that fast, or am I?



PRESENT DAY

CHAPTER 1

Abigail Foster stared through the windshield at the expired parking meter. Her fingers strangled the steering wheel, knuckles blanching, hands beginning to cramp. This had all seemed like such a good idea a month ago back in New York when she'd pitched the article to Margot, her editor at *Great Outdoors*. Now, on the verge of seeing him for the first time in twenty-six years, she realized she'd done herself the disservice of glossing over this moment and the fact that she'd have to walk into that building and face him.

Her watch showed five minutes to seven, which meant it was five to five, Mountain Time. She'd sat in this parking space for twenty minutes, and he was probably about to leave, thinking she'd decided not to come. The hostess showed her toward the back of the brewpub, which at five in the afternoon stood mostly empty. Peanut shells littered the floor, crunching beneath the heels of her black pumps, and the reek of brewing beer infused the air with a yeasty sourness. The hostess held the back door open and motioned to the only occupied table on the patio.

Abigail stepped outside, smoothed the Cavalli skirt she'd paid way too much for last year in Milan.

The doubt resurfaced. She shouldn't have come. No story was worth this.

He sat alone with his back to her at a west-facing table, with the town of Durango, Colorado, spread out before him in its high valley, specked with the bright yellows of cottonwood and aspen, enclosed by pine-wooded hills and bare shale hills and, farther back, the spruce forests and jagged peaks of the San Juans.

The sound of the patio door banging shut caught his attention. He looked over his shoulder, and at the sight of her, slid his chair back from the table and stood—tall, sturdy, wavy silver hair, dark blues, and dressed like something out of *Backpacker* magazine—plaid Patagonia button-up shirt tucked into a comfortable pair of jeans, Teva sandals.

She felt that knot constricting in her stomach again, noticed his left hand trembling. He seized the chair he'd been sitting in to steady it.

"Hi, Lawrence."

She knew he was fifty-two, but he'd aged even better than his photo on the history department's website indicated.

No handshake, no hug, just five seconds of what Abigail ranked as the most excruciating eye contact she'd ever held.

Easing down into a chair, she counted three empty pints on the table, wished she'd had the benefit of alcohol to steel herself for this meeting.

She rifled through her purse, found her sunglasses. It was Halloween, and though the air carried a chill, at this elevation the intensity of direct sunlight made it pleasant to sit outdoors.

"I'm glad you came," Lawrence said.

A waiter costumed as a hula dancer approached the table.

"Want a beer, Abigail?" Lawrence asked.

"Sure."

"They have a bunch of different—"

"I don't care. Something light."

He said to the waiter, "Bring her a Rock Hopped Pale."

"Right on."

The whistle of a steam-powered locomotive blew somewhere

up the valley. Abigail saw the plume of smoke in the distance, heard the chugging palpitations of the valve gears as the train steamed south through the heart of town.

“I don’t have any backpacking gear,” she said.

“Scott will outfit you.”

“Who’s Scott?”

“Our guide.”

The silence, uncomfortable as it came, crawled under her skin. “Pretty town you have here.”

She couldn’t help thinking this didn’t feel anything like she’d imagined it would. Having run countless versions of this moment through her head, they’d all carried more gravitas. She would scream at him. She’d hit him. They’d break down and cry together. He’d apologize. She’d accept. She wouldn’t. Now she understood none of that would happen.

They were just two people sharing a table, trying to limp through the awkwardness.

“I’m curious,” she said. “All this time, and now you contact me.”

“I’ve followed your journalism career, subscribe to all the magazines you contribute to, and I thought this . . . expedition . . . might be good fodder for your—”

“But you haven’t been interested in helping me since I was four years old.”

Lawrence slugged back the rest of his dark beer, stared at the mountains, wiped the foam from his beard.

Abigail said, “That came out more angry than—”

“No, it’s fine. You’ve got standing to be as angry as you want.”

“I’m not, though.”

The patio door opened and the waiter returned with Abigail’s pint and another round for Lawrence.

When he’d left, she raised her glass.

“Lawrence,” she said, “here’s to our past. Fuck it.”

He grinned. “That easy, huh?”

“We can pretend.”

They clinked pints and Abigail sipped her golden beer.

“So why’d you come?” Lawrence asked. “To be honest, I never expected a response to that email.”

“Funny, I was just sitting out in the car, building the nerve to walk in here, and trying to answer that question for myself.”

The sun ducked behind the mountains and Abigail shivered, the rocky slopes and snowfields blushing with alpenglow.