

## CHAPTER ONE: HOSTETTER

The stranger tromped through the double-swinging doors of the Keystone Saloon and Ice Cream Parlor, saddlebags over one shoulder and trailing a cloud of dust. He was a tall one, the stranger, who trod bow-legged and slouching over the floorboards, one dusty hand grasping a stick that cut a dirty trail behind him along the planks. The stick was long, about as long as the stranger. The stick was gnarled, a curl at its top. Otherwise, the stick was a stick. The spurs on the stranger's boots rang as he approached the bar. They and the stick drew the eyes of the half-drunk denizens in a way the stranger's grime had not. Nobody cared about dirt there. Hell, any who entered clean through those doors wasn't a man of honest work. But a man with a stick, now that was something.

Them who witnessed the stranger were few. Three grisly prospectors watched him from a round table a few feet off the entrance. They held beer mugs in dirt-chalked hands, suspending them inches from their red-burned faces. A clown sat far to one end of the bar, duded up in a black frock suit beneath whiteface with red greasepaint smeared about his mouth. He looked more feral than funny. The bartender watched the stranger with squinted eyes over a knobby nose and a handlebar mustache long in need of trimming. Beside him stood his only seemingly reputable patron, a bear of a man in a brown suit, high collar and tie, and a bowler hat perched back past his forehead. They all stared at the stranger because of his spurs, his stick, his unknown aspect, and the fact that no horse had drawn up to herald him.

The stranger stopped at the bar, looking at no one, greeting no one. He propped his stick against the tarnished rail and lowered his saddlebags to the worn counter. A half-circle of prairie dust settled atop the bar from his belongings.

"A drink," he said, his voice sounding of gravel deep in his throat.

"And what would you prefer?" The bartender swiped at the arc of dust with a none-too-clean rag. "Perhaps you'd imbibe one of our classic micro-brews, a Pissin' Bobcat fresh from Wall, or maybe our local specialty, a Strangled Sow? It's a fine red, so thick and lustrous you can just see particles of yeast floating beneath the cinnamon topping."

The stranger looked slowly up from his gnarled, gritty hands. His icy blue eyes focused on the bartender, and his thick mustache twitched. That face was long, chiseled from weather and suspicion. He raised one hand to tilt back his sweat-darkened Stetson. "What is this, a faggot bar? Whiskey. And one of them ice creams."

"Whiskey it is. Would that be Scotch, or a fine Kentucky Rye?"

The stranger looked at the bartender, his hands bunching into loose fists. "Rotgut."

"Yes, sir. Excellent choice. I stilled it back by the outhouse just yesterday." The bartender reached beneath the counter and brought up a brown, unlabeled, corked bottle and a shot glass. He slapped the glass before the stranger and twisted the cork from the bottle.

The big man in the brown suit straightened. He grasped the lapels of his jacket and faced the stranger. "Friend, you look like the waste spillway of this here town's gold mining enterprise. Where you from, if it ain't too immodest to ask?"

"Montana."

The bartender sloshed the shot glass full. He stood holding the neck of the bottle, ready to cock it forward again.

"Montana, eh?" The man in the brown suit grinned and looked pointedly at the saddlebags. "I got acquaintances in Helena. Rough country between Keystone and those parts. Walk all the way, did ya?"

The stranger lifted his glass between one thumb and middle finger. He held it a few inches from his mustache and licked his lips. "Ambushed. Bastards took my horse, my gear, my guns." He slapped back the whiskey, then lowered the glass gingerly to the bar. "More." He drew his duster back from his waist. The holster at his hip hung empty.

"Sorry to hear that." The man in the brown suit shook his head in a show of disapproval. "Nearby, was it? You should inform the law."

The stranger threw back another gulp of fire. "I am the law."

"Really. And I thought Sheriff Madson maintained that high position."

The grizzled onlookers sniggered at the brown suit's witticism.

"More," the stranger told the bartender, and stared at his empty glass. "I be Clayton Hostetter, U.S. Marshal. Sent here by President Theodore Roosevelt himself. To deal with range agitators. Fence cutters. Crop defilers. General uncivilized folk." He shoved the lapel of his coat aside to reveal a tarnished silver star.

Everyone in the bar drew up a little straighter.

"Marshal, eh?" The man in the brown suit grinned. "I reckon you've found some of them 'uncivilized folk.'"

"Bastards."

"We been wondering when you might show up. Those fence cutters letting all the cattle run loose. And them that make the circles in the crops. Very odd." The brown suit stuck out his hand. "Dave Swanzey, prospector, explorer, businessman. This here is Mr. Johnson, the proprietor of this fine establishment." He indicated the bartender with a flourish. The bartender just stood there, holding the rotgut bottle. "We welcome you to Keystone, Marshal Hostetter."

The suddenly more respected stranger ignored the hand Swanzey offered him and downed his whiskey. He slapped down the glass.

"On the house," Mr. Johnson said, and poured another. "Just call me Howard."

The marshal turned toward the clown. "And what do I call that?"

"*He*," Swanzey emphasized, "would be called Clem on any other day. He's dressed up for the celebration."

"Celebration?"

Swanzey threw out his hands in grand fashion. "Yes, sir. Welcome, Marshal Hostetter, to the twentieth anniversary of our fine town's founding."

"So you hired a clown?"

"Clem's more of a volunteer."

Marshal Hostetter pointed his empty glass at Clem. "That there clown gonna scare shit out of the young'uns."

Swanzey offered the marshal a scolding schoolmarm look. "Sir, you are forgiven for not knowing the vim and vinegar of our local stock. But the children of Keystone are made of sterner stuff than you imply."

"You got you a ice cream parlor."

"And saloon, sir, and saloon."

"Ever place I been to with a ice cream parlor been filled to the rafters with soft-handed pussies."

A chorus of grumbling sounded from around the saloon. Some of the hairy, taciturn spectators rested fingers on their holstered guns. Swanzey scanned the room with alert eyes before leaning close to the stranger.

"Marshal Hostetter, with respect to you and your high office. You go around mouthing insults like that, you will not endear yourself to the town."

Marshal Hostetter looked at Mr. Johnson. Maybe he wondered if the burly barman might smash that bottle over an offender's skull. Howard made no sign of his intention. "I meant no offense," the marshal said. "I ain't here to do no endearin', though. I'm here to kill outlaws."

"We generally go for capturing them first," Swanzey said. "And then a trial."

"Yeah. *Then* we kill 'em," Howard Johnson said.

"Right." Hostetter looked longingly at his empty glass, but too much liquor on a parched tongue brings about the devil's bullshit, as they say. He pushed the glass away. "Well, since I ain't got no outlaws in hand, I believe I might partake of some of that there ice cream, as I said. Seein' as it's there anyhow. Whatcha got?"

Howard put down the rotgut bottle. "We have both flavors, vanilla and vanilla bean."

Hostetter stared at Howard for a good couple of seconds. "So what in tarnation is the difference between vanilla and vanilla bean?"

Howard paused as he reached for a dirty glass and his dirty rag to polish it with. For a moment, he didn't seem all that clear on what the question meant. "Well, obviously, vanilla bean has beans in it."

"Beans."

"Absolutely. Like navy beans or sometimes pinto beans. Whatever beans we can get."

"And why would a fella want beans in his ice cream?"

"You don't *have* to have beans in your ice cream, but some customers prefer the extra flavor and texture. And it's a quick way to imbibe both your supper and your dessert in one bite."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

Hostetter grunted. "Well, maybe you ought to shove some biscuits in that there ice cream churn while you're at it, make the supper complete."

Howard, grinning, waved an index finger at the lawman. "No, no, no, Marshal. No churn here. We have the latest in ammonia-infused mechanical refrigeration here at the Keystone Saloon and Ice Cream Parlor. All our ice cream is imported. All the way from New York City!"

"New York City?"

"New York City!"

"Huh. Well, don't you know, Mr. Johnson, that New York City ain't but the biggest haven for pussies and faggots anywhere in these here United States and territories? Aww, what's it matter? I reckon a bunch of faggoty pussies probably make the best ice cream there is, the limp-wristed bastards."

Swanzey, who had kept his mouth shut a long time but had been staring at Hostetter with widening eyes and rising eyebrows, cleared his throat and latched once more onto the lapels of his coat. "I reckon, sir, that, though I personally share your views of the eastern climes, I would be remiss if I failed to point out that the words themselves are, shall we say, impolitic."

"Spit on that," Hostetter growled. "I been ambushed, robbed, and horse-stole. I need some ice cream!"

"Are you hungry for a full meal?" Howard asked with an ingratiating smile.

"Not as I can say. Had me some salt rabbit in my boot to tide me over."

"Then, sir, we'll skip the beans."

Hostetter wolfed down his ice cream and asked for another bowl. But when he went for his purse to pay the barman, his fingers hesitated at the vest pocket beneath his badge. "Hmmm," he grumbled.

"Hmmm?" Mr. Johnson asked, raising a concerned eyebrow. It didn't take a gilded paper from Harvard to know what either "Hmmm" was about.

"I ain't got no coin," Hostetter said.

Mr. Johnson made a deflating sound that wiggled the hairs of his mustache.

"Them varmints what waylaid me, they took my purse."

Mr. Johnson turned his eyes meaningfully on the empty bowl. That ice cream didn't come cheap. It was all the way from New York City, after all. The rotgut he wasn't looking to give a hoot about.

Swanzey laughed deep like a bear and slapped the bar with one big palm. "That's so the way of things, isn't it, boys? Misfortune rarely takes one pass. Don't worry about the bill, Marshal. We know you're good for it. Right, Howard?"

"Well ... okay." But Mr. Johnson still stared with longing at the bowl.

"Why don't you get the marshal that other bowl of ice cream?" Swanzey suggested. "Let's show how Keystone supports its lawmen, eh?"

Johnson looked horrified, but Hostetter saved him from that attempted extortion.

"No, thankee," he said, but he licked his lips while he looked at the bowl. "I don't cotton to charity." He placed both palms on the bar and pushed away. "Still, I would be beholden, Mr. Johnson, if you would take my chit on the matter of the ice cream until such time I'm forwarded some pay."

"Sure, Marshal," Johnson said, choking a little on the words. "I trust you to make good."

"I thank you again. You're a Christian soul, no mistake. Now, I should see to the matter of that pay, and to the outlaws what make it necessary." He took his saddlebags in one hand and the stick in the other. "Could either of you gents direct me to the sheriff?"

"Cross the street, five doors down on your right," Johnson said.

"Many thanks." Hostetter tapped the brim of his Stetson and turned to tromp out the way he had come. Every eye followed him except those of one prospector, who directed his attention instead to his neighbor's cards.

Out on the boardwalk, Hostetter squinted up and down the wide, dusty street. Keystone wasn't much, the truth be told, maybe fifteen, twenty buildings of sun-bleached wood, the tallest the whorehouse across from the saloon. A few men lounged in rocking chairs out front of the barber's two doors down and again in front of the feed store a few buildings down from the whorehouse. For a town all set for a birthday celebration, the place looked awfully hound dog sleepy. A casual observer wouldn't have recognized the whorehouse except for the red bit of cloth streaming from one of its porch posts. Gray dust, the creaking doldrums, and the razor cliffs of the Black Hills leaning in from the east. There were a hundred towns just like it up and down the trail, none of them worth a mouthful of spit.

Hostetter hefted his saddlebags onto one shoulder and gripped the stick at its middle, then stepped off the boards and back into the dust. He clearly didn't need the stick for walking. His stride was strong now that he had some whiskey in him. He marched between the horses tied at the saloon hitching posts, angled around the buckboard parked askew alongside the horses, and headed straight for where the sheriff might be though he couldn't see no shingle that was obvious. The tired but habitual wind clattered grains of sand off his duster and fluttered the brim of his hat.

"Marshal? Marshal!"

Hostetter stopped in the middle of the street. It wasn't like a wagon threatened to run him down.

Swanzy cantered up to him, then the two continued onward.

"I found myself thinking," the man in the brown suit said. "If you're expecting to go after outlaws, you need provisions. A horse. A gun. Such things as that."

"That would be so."

"So, I was wondering, with your recent misfortunes and all, how do you plan to pay for said provisions?"

"I been sent by President Theodore Roosevelt himself. I don't expect no trouble wiring for expenses."

"Ah, yes, deep pockets, Washington. I suppose there'd be no difficulty. And with the sheriff's backing, you could arrange all your other requirements on good credit, I'm sure."

"I'm sure."

"Dry goods, camp kit, a little shine to keep you warm at night."

"I reckon so."

"A guide."

They stepped up onto the boards across from the saloon. Hostetter halted and turned square on the big man. "I imagine you got a recommendation in that last department."

"I believe the folks around here would swear that there's no better forester, no better rock climber, and no better man with knowledge of the land than David Swanzy."

"And that be you."

"As advertised."

"Why am I not surprised? Well. Tell you what, David Swanzy. How about you demonstrate these keen forestry and trackin' skills by sniffin' out the sheriff's office."

Swanzy grinned like an iron miner in the sun. "That would be right this way."

The sheriff's office stood so near, an octogenarian could have kicked a cow pie to its threshold. And there really wasn't no shingle hanging near. Swanzy pushed open the door and held it for Hostetter,

grinning. Hostetter gave him a look that spoke of suspicion and a mild itch of ire, then tromped through into the office.

Nothing special presented itself within, just the usual Spartan wood plank surroundings plus two ancient, but also cheap desks, a wall papered with wanted posters, and a wood stove holding up a tin coffee pot. Behind one of the desks and in front of the single and empty holding cell sat a gnarled old man with a mustache so overgrown he appeared to have no mouth. Gray hair streamed just as wildly onto his neck and over his ears, but the top of his skull was as bald as a stone, and shiny. He held the barrel assembly of an M1899 Springfield carbine in one knotty hand, an oily cloth in the other. One booted foot was propped on the desk, not far from the rest of the rifle parts. He gave his visitors a disinterested glance, then went back to rubbing down the length of the barrel.

"Afternoon, Sheriff." Swanzey took off his hat and stood a step behind Hostetter.

"Mr. Swanzey," the sheriff said, but he didn't look up from his work.

"Brought you a visitor, Sheriff, a man of high caliber and repute. Sheriff Tolan Madson, meet Marshal Clayton Hostetter, new of these parts and gainfully employed."

Hostetter tapped the tip of his stick to the brim of his hat.

The sheriff stared at him, then tilted his head and spat a black gob of chew toward the spittoon next to his desk. He missed by at least a foot. By the looks of his floor, he missed a lot. "Hostetter, eh? You the feller I got the wire about? The specialist from Washington, eh?"

Hostetter clumped over to the wall of wanted posters and seemed to peruse the updates. "Can't say as I've been in Washington in years, but they the ones sent me."

"On the order of President Theodore Roosevelt himself," Swanzey clarified.

Sheriff Madson chewed some more and wiped down the black steel guts of his rifle. "Interestin'. So's you know President Roosevelt, eh?"

"I been in his shadow once or twice. Kettle Hill, for one."

Nobody spoke. Swanzey went lantern-eyed, like somebody had stuck him with a saber.

Sheriff Madson laid the rifle barrel on his desk and straightened to fuss with the smaller components. He raised the bolt assembly into the insufficient light from the tiny window by the door, then rubbed at it with the rag.

"You was at Kettle Hill?" he finally said. "Poor, luckless bastard, you is."

"Yeah, reckon so." Hostetter stared at one of the posters. "Truth of it is, I didn't need to be there. See, Roosevelt knew me from earlier, asked me to join his regiment, them Rough Riders. I'd been doing some sheriffin' three or so year before, up in North Dakota. I helped him with a thievin' problem he had."

"What? Horses? Cattle?"

"A boat. Anyways, he remembered, and looked me up when he mobilized for the war. I couldn't turn him down. Had to fight, see, for the security of these here United States and cock and bull like that."

"I hear Mr. Roosevelt got a medal for that," Swanzey said. "What did you get, Marshal?"

"A slug in the leg." Hostetter lifted one of the posters from the wall and held it out to Madson. The yellowing paper showed a clean-shaven, boyish face with large eyes. "Tell me about this one."

Madson had started reassembling his rifle. "That one there's a wily work, eh? Alfred Southerman. Him and his gang been all over these hills, mainly stealing cattle, the occasional armed dispute. Been huntin' them boys for months, eh, but they just run off into the mountains and disappear every time. I figure they ride with somebody bigger. They don't seem smart enough to avoid my jail so long on their own. Why you interested in them? I thought you had bigger problems to deal with."

Hostetter nodded, but stared hard at the poster. "I do, but this here man, he stole my property." He folded the poster and stuffed it in the watch pocket of his dusty vest. "I mean to find him, and get my property back."

## CHAPTER TWO: SINFONEE MCKENZIE-RODRIGUEZ-YUN

The afternoon sun moved a notch higher, casting the beginnings of shadows onto the street. The tired town didn't wake up so much as roll over and fluff its pillow. A couple of buckboards full of men trundled in, also a buggy carrying two respectable-looking ladies in high collars and long, street sweeper dresses. Three riders joined them, two boy-faced wranglers and a handsome woman in her later years.

These met at the mercantile and came out later with Harry Dern, the shopkeeper. The menfolk carried ladders, tool boxes and a spool of range wire. The ladies struggled under the bulk of a rolled up canvas.

For the next few hours, the townsfolk stretched banners across the street, one on the westward limit of Keystone and one in the east. The banners read "HAPPY BIRTHDAY KEYSTONE" and "20TH ANNIVERSARY SHINDIG!" The workers hammered posts into the road at either limit of the town, and hung signs on the posts. The signs read

Keystone 20th Anniversary Celebration  
Today, sunset till the sheriff says go home  
Board horses at Chawin Chucks Livery Stable  
No fighting, no cussing, no spitting  
No guns. Check them here.  
No pigs or goats!

They hoisted up plenty of red, white, and blue bunting and hung paper lanterns from every post and porch cover. In the middle of the street, two long planks on sawhorses served as a table where the ladies loaded up fried chickens, taters, corn, bread, and pies. The men set up a dunking booth where celebrants would get to dip the preacher, two throws for a penny. The sheriff came out of his office to introduce Hostetter to Chawin' Chuck and secure the marshal a horse maybe, and tack. But Chawin' Chuck was too busy arranging the horse race event and couldn't possibly see to the marshal till morning. That was all right, as the marshal needed gear and weapons before he could ride, not to mention a direction to ride to.

After the meeting with Chuck, Hostetter leaned against the porch post outside the sheriff's office and took in the sights. Sheriff Madson went to supervise construction of a shooting range made of hay bales and tin cans. The solicitor complained that his office was situated down range and he didn't believe a hay bale would stop a .45 caliber bullet fired by a drunk cowboy. The sheriff agreed, so they turned the whole to-do around so it faced the barber's instead.

Through all this, more and more people arrived until the setup itself looked much like the celebration would. The sheriff deputized four men, two to stand at each end of town to collect guns and deny entrance to pigs and goats. He checked the firearms for the shooting competition to ensure they were loaded, chambered and cocked, for convenience's sake. Keystone was looking for a real good time.

Round about six by the railroad clock, folks started to arrive who weren't there for the setup. Sodbuster families of six and eight brats, stinking cowhands, and genteel honored citizens all wandered into town on foot, on horseback, or in buggies or wagons. One fella, who had recently taken payment on stock in the Holy Terror Mine, entered town in a brand new Benz automobile to the consternation of the horses and the gentler ladies. But by far the greater number of arrivals could only be classified as miners. Black with soot or gray with mud, they tromped into the celebration streaming with sweat and bent from exhaustion. They came right off the shift, fresh paid and long-time stupid. The dunk booth men, the shooting range captain, the betting agent, the whorehouse madam, and Howard Johnson all cracked their knuckles and rubbed their hands together at the sight of so many suckers. Keystone was good and roused as the sun dipped low in the sky.

Nothing was officially open, of course. Sunset wasn't for another few hours. But the townsfolk gathered and talked, and went about visiting. In a hard land requiring hard work to survive, the good people of Keystone rarely came together to take their ease.

"Try this, Marshal," Howard Johnson said when he sauntered over to the porch post Hostetter had taken to holding up. He held out a tin cup mounded with ice cream and speared with an iron spoon. The ancient prospector loitering alongside Hostetter widened his bloodshot, rheumy eyes and licked his cracked lips.

"You ain't got that out here in this heat, do you?" Hostetter chewed on a sprig of straw and stared at the cup.

"Just the samples." Johnson pushed the cup toward Hostetter again. "This here's a special concoction, held back in my private reserve. Ordered it particularly for this grand celebration. As you know, all the way from New York City."

"New York City!" exclaimed the prospector, spitting tobacco juice in his astonishment.

"That's right," Johnson said, winking. "New York City!"

"Ain't got no means to pay," Hostetter reminded the barkeep.

"Free sample! It's a new flavor. Rocky Road, it's called, and never a more delicious confection might you find this side of the O-hio Valley."

Hostetter grunted. It was impossible to tell what he meant by that. But he leaned his stick up against the post and took the cup.

"Ain't you givin' out no more 'o that?" the prospector asked, dribbling brown juice down his tangled beard.

"Free for everyone! Sinfonee! More Rocky Road!"

A slim Negro girl in a gingham dress separated from the ladies at the food table and hurried to Johnson holding two tin cups of ice cream. She looked odd in that company, and not just because of her darkie hide. She carried herself with quick, almost birdlike movements, emphasized by her straight, tall posture. She was comely for a Negro, with big, round, wavering eyes, an angular face, and ample curves everywhere else. Her black hair was straight but untamed and coarse, hanging past her shoulders and alive in the evening breeze.

There was no doubt at all that she had neglected the usual undergarments that should have accompanied her dress. The material flapped before her kicking stride and the shape of those legs became evident with each step. She carried a leather satchel against one hip, its wide leather strap crossing over her chest, emphasizing her breasts as it hung from one shoulder. She could have made good money in the whorehouse.

That was about what the town ladies thought, evident in their haughty stares of disapproval.

Johnson took the ice cream from the colored girl and handed one to the prospector, who dove into it like a parched man attacks water.

"This ice cream is of the highest quality," Johnson bragged. "It's what you call arTEESH-ee-Anne."

"I don't call it no such thing." Hostetter poked at the mound of frozen stuff. "Looks funny."

"The finest Swiss chocolate, vanilla--"

"Not vanilla bean, I hope."

"No, pure vanilla! Plus, special flavoring and additions."

Hostetter lifted a spoonful into his mouth. His jaws worked and his eyes narrowed.

"This here's good stuff," the prospector said when he wasn't slurping or smacking his lips.

Hostetter spit a great gob of half-chewed dairy product into the street.

"Marshal!" Johnson exclaimed, his big face widening with shock.

"That's dirt in there!" Hostetter shoved the cup back at Johnson.

"Of course there is. That's why they call it Rocky Road." The barkeep took the cup, but his face had taken on a look of sullen disapproval. "The finest additions from revolutionary Valley Forge, from Gettysburg, and from San Juan Hill. It's history, Marshal!"

Hostetter spat out a rock.

"Perhaps such rich taste isn't suited for all palettes," Johnson said.

"Anybody gonna eat that?" The prospector held out his hand and Johnson placed the cup in it. The grizzled old timer was wolfing the remains in no time.

"Sinfonee!" Johnson called over his shoulder. "Cleanup on Gutter One!" He tapped two fingers to his forehead and made a slight bow toward Hostetter, who stood bent over, gagging and spitting. "Marshal, good night." Then he walked into the party, presumably to offer another lucky celebrant his cup of ice cream, dirt, and rocks.

"Better stop that spittin', Marshal," the prospector said, chuckling. "It's against the rules, you know."

The Negro girl returned with a pail and a spade in one hand and a cup of water in the other. She dropped the spade and bucket and handed the water to Hostetter. The drink was good, healthy well water, golden brown and not too many bugs. Hostetter took a deep swig, rolled it around in his mouth, and ejected it into the dirt.

Some of it splattered onto the darkie's hands and forearms as she shoveled up the expelled, masticated ice cream blob. She froze a moment, a load of crud in her spade, then sighed and finished her scoop.

"Disease vector probabilities high," she muttered. "Typhoid fever, typhus, polio, measles, AIDS. Wash. Disinfect. Gonna need lye." She plopped the shovelful of mess into her bucket and scurried away, leaving Hostetter holding the water cup.

"What?" Supporting himself against the porch post, the marshal stared after her.

The prospector nodded and stroked his rat's nest of beard. "Yep. You keep spittin', you're gonna git fined."

Hostetter threw the cup into the street, then snatched up his stick and stalked off toward the bar.

He might have been curious about the Negro girl if he had noticed what she did as he passed. Her behavior was strange for an almost invisible darkie engaged in menial labor. She stopped washing her hands, reached into her leather bag, fiddled with something, then held the bag up toward the marshal as he tromped along in front of her.

A faint glow peeked from the bag, shining out through open spaces at the flap and squeezing past the most worn of the stitching. A body had to be looking right at the bag to see the light. Though the shadows in the street were long, it was still full day.

"Ion scattering. Neutrino count optimal," the girl said, probably to herself. "Probable target source. Now where's that lye?"

She lowered the bag but kept her eyes on the marshal. She looked to be ready to follow him, but one of the town ladies intervened with brusque orders to scrub up some puke the miners had left at the apple bobbing stall.



The marshal showed a mighty desire to get himself good and drunk, but such a want is difficult to fulfill without the expediting silver. He settled for hanging around the saloon and partaking of the free tastes from Howard Johnson's exotic stock of microbrews. He wasn't the only leech fastened onto Johnson. From just before sundown to deep in the night, the saloon put up with every variety of moocher, cheapskate, drunk and rapscaillon, all on the hunt for free beer. They crowded the bar, shoving and punching over the limited number of two-finger pulls of Johnson's varied, if suspect, stock. Hostetter got his fair share or more. By the wee hours of midnight, one, or two, depending on whose watch was consulted, the marshal had managed a slight buzz and an ill stomach on such inviting specialty brews as Rebel's Corpse, Wild Indian, Holy Terror, and Gangrene Teat. He stepped out of the bar, stick in hand, when Johnson announced closing time.

The darkie girl waited on the porch.

While the saloon emptied, its occupants departing for impromptu late-night fights and gutter pisses, Hostetter remained on the porch. He stretched his back and laid the stick along his shoulders. He extended his arms along the shaft and rotated far at the waist, both directions. The trail tightens a man, fills him full of knots and kinks. Besides, the marshal had no place to go, not having coin for a room.



After he stretched a few times, Hostetter noticed the darkie girl, or at least let on that he had.

"What're you loiterin' for?" he asked. "Don't you got nowhere to be?"

"Yes. Do you?"

Hostetter stopped stretching. He peered at the girl, looked her up and down. "Is that a invitation? My purse is empty, and even if it weren't, I don't lay with niggers."

The darkie girl jumped a little, as if she hiccupped. "Pejorative colloquialism," she said. "Commonplace among the ruling class. Dismissible." She darted forward two steps, enough to come within arm's reach of the marshal. "I'm Sinfonee McKenzie-Rodriguez-Yun. Not a nigger."

Hostetter's bushy gray brows lowered and his mustache twitched. He brought the stick down and rested its tip on the boards between his feet. "Uppity nigger, too. South Dakota ain't so different from Alabama, girl. Show some respect."

The girl's lips twitched, up, down, up again. "Don't know what to make of you," she said, then snatched the stick from Hostetter's hand.

The marshal stood there a good second, staring at where his stick had been. Then he dropped his hands to his sides, and turned on her. "Why you little--"

"Charged atomic core. Trans-universal nugget. How to manage containment field?" She spun the stick a few times, looking at it from all directions, then tossed it back to the marshal. "You come with me. The president's order."

Hostetter caught the stick two-handed. As the girl turned to walk away, he extended the staff to touch her shoulder. "What the tarnation-- Get back here, girl. Answer some questions. You work for Colonel Roosevelt?"

She stopped and flitted her big eyes to the end of the stick on her shoulder. "No. Franklin Delano."

"Who?"

"The staff. Biometrically activated?"

"What?"

The girl turned back to him. For all her crazy talk, she seemed bland, as if she'd been in the medicinals and wasn't quite in her head. "Sorry. Nineteenth century western colloquial speech isn't my first language."

"It's the twentieth century, dumbass."

She nodded. "I see the problem." She cocked her head. "Two hours from now. Boehm-Schumacher event. Level two. I know where it is. Come with me."

"What? A balmy shoemaker? Two of 'em? What?"

Her lips flicked upward. "Not too bright." She turned away again and started up the boards with that quick, sure, kicking stride she had shown on the street earlier.

Hostetter stared after her. He put his hands on his hips, behind his neck, then intertwined on the end of his stick. He glowered, huffed, and rolled his eyes.

But, in the end, he followed her.

## **CHAPTER THREE: WILLIE DERN**

She was a high-stepper, this Symphony McKenzie-Whoever-the-Hell. She kicked along the road out of town like she marched in a parade on the Fourth of July. Hostetter followed, grumbling. He followed her past the last building, out of reach of the last oil lantern, and clean off the passable trail that connected Keystone and distant, dusty Hill City. Before long, the marshal stumbled along under the black canopies of Ponderosa pines and rustling oaks, tripping over roots and rocks. This was not the best of procedures. It

was fool's errands like this that found a feller robbed, ridiculed, and wearing only his skivvies come the morning sun. Hostetter had been ambushed once already.

Not only that, but the woman he followed would have set any man off his ease, truth be told. Yes, she would have made a pleasant handful for them that cared about such things, and she wore far too few underthings beneath her dress. But the way she moved through the woods was nothing less than unnatural. Whenever she entered the shadow of a tree -- and those woods were hardly anything but shadows -- she seemed to disappear.

She didn't vanish in the sense of the shadows blocking her out; she seemed instead to wink out of existence then reappear where the moonlight managed to cut through the leaves. The dark claimed her; the light gave her up, and on and on. She soldiered along among the close-set pillars of gargantuan trees, marching over rocks, mounded earth, and roots as if it were noon and she walked a marked path. So, she could see in the dark. This female was something other than the everyday illiterate, chicken-stealing Negro. She hadn't just learned to talk smart, she knew what she was saying.

Hostetter stopped in his tracks. He reached into his frayed vest pocket for a cigarette, then frowned when he remembered. The robbers had taken his *cigarettes*. They had taken his cigarettes when they took his horse, guns, bedroll, camp gear, and his two tins of chaw tobacco. Well, okay. But still Hostetter didn't move. He leaned on his stick and waited.

It took a minute for the darkie woman to notice.

She halted, probably noticing the absence of Hostetter's hitherto constant complaints. She glanced to where he should have been, looked startled, and scanned the surrounding woods more deeply.

"Come along," the woman called when she spied him.

"Sorry, won't happen." Hostetter tilted his hat back.

The nigger backtracked. "Marshal, I told you. We're on a schedule."

"Yeah, well, I've been known to be ornery."

"We've no time for ornery. Level two event. You are required--"

"That ain't gonna work, Miss Sinf'nee. Now, maybe you're on the up and up, and maybe you ain't. Care to start talkin' so's I can figure out which?" He squinted into the woman's face. It was half shadowed, and so only half there. "Go on now. What's it to be? We get there soon, or later after we head back to town?"

"That's an idle threat."

"I'm in the wilderness at night, don't know where I am, with a nigger bitch who fades in and out of the light and talks like a goldarned gypsy, and I ain't got no weapons to speak of. Damned straight I'll go back to town. I'll go back holdin' you by your hair."

They stood there in the dark, the pines rustling about them.

"I can tell you," she said, "or show you, once we get to the house."

"The what? There's a house now?"

"There was always a house. I'm not trying to entrap you."

"Uh-uh."

"Huh?"

"Uh-uh. Don't you speak no good English? I reckon not. What's that name of your'n again?"

She threw him an exasperated sigh. "Sinfonee McKenzie-Rodriguez-Yun. What does it matter?"

"Well, it says you ain't no normal person, that's sure. That first name makes no sense. Who names their kid after a bunch o' fiddlers? Then that last name. What is it? You Irish, Mexican, or a Chinawoman? Don't matter, 'cause ain't a one of 'em reputable."

"I don't know what to tell you." The darkie stood there like a statue. The way she stood would have unnerved any man. It was as if she weren't really there, like she only needed her mouth just then, so that was all she connected to her brain.

"You could start with your real name. I think you just made that one up to make you sound more 'merican. You failed on that point, by the way."

"They said you'd be difficult. I should have grabbed you this afternoon. There's no time." Her eyes started working. She stared at him, at the woods, at him. "Come with me. We've only seventy-three

minutes--" She snatched up her satchel and peered inside it, then dropped it back to her hip. "--and twenty-two point six seconds."

Hostetter grinned. "Till when? Till we meet your unsavory friends? Are they niggers, Mexicans, and Chinamen too, or do you just take up with white trash Irish?"

"No trap. This is important. If I lie to you, you can beat me."

"Now, that's a true statement. You make sure you know, girl, I will do just that if you leading me astray. I'll beat you down with this here stick, no mistake, y'hear?"

"I understand and submit."

Hostetter stood straighter, hefting his stick. He peered into the dark all around. "Okay now. How far to this house of your'n?"

"Three point four kilometers. We have to hurry."

"Yeah, yeah, stop tryin' to be smart with them kilometers and them points. Get on, girl. I'm right behind you, and the stick is closer!"



They reached the house an hour later, with Symfunny setting a grueling pace overland. She crashed her way out of the treeline, angling onto a direct path to the windowless back of the rustic shelter. Hostetter dropped his stick, grabbed her collar, and hauled her whooping back into the trees.

The darkie glared at him. "What was that?"

"Use them unnatural peepers of your'n." The marshal stooped to pick up his stick, and did not rise. "Moon's lit the house, lit the clearing... You see them dead circles at the edge of the grass, right out there in the wheat?"

"Oh, no..."

"Look familiar, do they?"

"Yes. We're too late. What do we do?"

"Well, if it was daylight and I was armed and had a passel of deputies behind me, I'd ask how you know what the tarnation I was talkin' about, but that'll save for later. Right now, I think you better get behind me and stay close. We'll check this out real quiet-like."

"I can take care of myself."

"I don't give a goldarned shit about you, I just don't want you gettin' me killed." Hostetter straightened and tested the balance of the stick in his hand. He scanned carefully side-to-side, then quickly to his rear. No sound came from the house, no chirp of bugs, no song from birds, nothing from critters of any kind. The place smelled of sweet rot.

Well, that couldn't be good.

Hostetter stepped into the clearing that separated the woods from the house. One step. No rustle of startled badmen, though they might already have been roused by the darkie's tromping and squealing from earlier. Still, nobody shot at him. He took slow, careful strides toward the building. The marshal's boots crackled on dry grass and the woman's dress rustled behind him.

He reached the back wall of the house and leaned against it.

"Smell it?" SinPhoney asked, and Hostetter cringed at the loudness of her.

"You keep your trap shut," he whispered. "The way you carryin' on, you might as well dance out there on a goat standin' on a cow, and singin' Dixie!"

"I don't think anyone's here. That's putrefaction. Animals dead for hours."

"We'll be dead for hours if you don't shut your hole!"

Hostetter took a few deep breaths, then edged toward the corner of the house. The girl stayed close to him.

"I really doubt anyone's here," the darkie whispered loud enough to scare horses.

Hostetter gave no reply. He peeked around the corner. There wasn't much to see, just the next long stretch of wall and a bunch of dark, hairy humps about thirty yards out at the edge of a field of green

wheat. Those lumps were heaped at equal intervals in what looked like a broad half-circle, but it was hard to tell with the house blocking the view.

The marshal started around the corner, then paused.

Nobody shot him or sprang out to scalp him, so he continued along the second wall until he reached the front corner. There, he took another peek.

"What do you see?"

"Shut yo' mouth!"

The dead cows -- because the humps in the field were cows for sure -- definitely made a half-circle out front of the house. The farthest carcass lay maybe seventy yards off to the west, the closest thirty feet to the east.

"Don't see nobody," Hostetter whispered. "Them cattle been there a while, and the wheat field was scooped out right up to the carcasses. The whole thing forms a circle. Half of it's inside the house. I can see pretty good all the way back to them trees in the west--"

The damned nigger girl stepped right out around him and strode around the front of the house. Hostetter sputtered, then stalked out and grabbed her by the wrist.

"What in the wild, wild west is the matter with you?" he snapped. "Ain't you never been bushwhacked? I have, and I don't like it one bit!"

"You said there was no one around."

"I said I didn't *see* nobody. That ain't the same as nobody bein' about. Why, I got me a good mind to--

"

"Oh!" The girl stood open-mouthed as she stared at the front of the house. Her big eyes glittered in the moonlight.

Much of the house was missing, vanished, as if the Almighty had slapped a biscuit cutter down onto Earth, taking away a portion of field lined with cows and the greater portion of the house with one mighty flick of His wrist. A perfect circle lifted from the farm, two-thirds of the house included. Not blown up, not torn down, but completely gone, even the roof. A cast iron stove inside the ruin had been half in, half out of the circle. The half of the stove inside the arc was gone, sliced from the whole as if it had never been. The girl stared horrified, as if that sort of thing didn't happen every day.

"Well," Hostetter said, "looks like I got to telegraph the gov'ment."

"Me, too," the girl said.

"What? What you mean 'me, too'? Since when are you a marshal? There ain't no nigger marshals and there ain't no *woman* nigger marsh-- Come back here!"

She was in the house, across the dead zone within the circle. Then she entered the house proper, drew up, and let loose a terrible squeal. She sounded so sore afraid that Hostetter froze on his way to snatch her back.

Whatever had cut loose two-thirds of the house had taken one corner of a wood-box bed. It had also taken a chunk of the woman lying there.

It had taken her clean, like a red-hot knife through beeswax. Everything was missing along a line from the right side of her neck to under her left arm. The wound was seared, heated so hot, and apparently so fast, that not a drop of blood had spattered the floor or the mattress.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst was that the body still smoked at the wound. It didn't smoke much, but it did.

"Come on back here," Hostetter said. "This place ain't safe."

"Dead!"

"I reckon so. Come on back here now."

She took one step backward, then froze.

"Whatchoo sniffin' about?" Hostetter complained. "She's dead. She can't harm you none."

"That wasn't me sniffing."

They stood there a good half a minute, then heard it again.

The girl and the marshal turned their heads toward the only corner of the house not molested by whatever had cut out the homestead. The girl took a few tentative steps into that corner.

"Back up there, missy," Hostetter ordered her. "I'll check it out." He hefted his stick. "That there's men's work."

She spared him an incredulous, broadly sneering glare, then stepped farther into the dark of the house, where she disappeared. "Oh, by the strings of all the worlds, are you all right?" Her voice chilled the bone, seeing as it came from nowhere.

She reappeared with a kid. She held him tightly by the shoulders and rubbed his arms and chest. Hostetter stared at them.

The boy had sodbuster written all over him. Those must have been milk cows out there in his field. He was so filthy he might have dirtied the ground if he sat down on it. He had blond hair where any of it showed through the crud, and wore threadbare coveralls but no shirt. The boy wasn't barefoot, but he might as well have been, his boots were so split, scuffed and water-warped. He had the biggest eyes a kid ever had right to, either due to a gift from his parents or because he was scared beyond speaking.

"What's your name, boy?" Hostetter demanded when the girl deposited her find before him.

"W-W-Willie, sir."

Okay, so not scared beyond speaking.

"Ain't you got no given name?"

"Dern, sir. My pa, he's Cletus Dern. Was."

"When did this here thing happen?" Hostetter asked.

"Marshal. He's a boy, not a criminal to be interrogated." The darkie girl held the kid close and gave Hostetter the evil eye.

"He's a material witness. When I catch the bastards what done this, the circuit judge might care to hear his words."

"Is that so?" a new voice called, and Hostetter drew in a puff of breath. He said something to himself, something, by his expression, that wasn't proper. Then he turned toward the voice.

Two men strode lazily around from the west side of the house, one with his hand on his holstered pistol, the other with a rifle aimed at Hostetter's chest. There wasn't no wall there for them to hide behind, so they must have come up quiet-like from the woods. The leading man stopped when Hostetter showed his face. Then he laughed.

"Well, howdy, lawman!" the man bellowed. His accomplice stood to one side of him. He was a skinny feller looking too small for a horse, like maybe he'd be better on a pony. Or a dog.

"Howdy-do." Hostetter stepped next to the darkie girl, never taking his eyes from the men.

The taller man just laughed, a deep, confident sound. "Y'all made a ruckus sneaking on up here. We heard you from all the way yonder."

"And yonder would be?" the marshal asked.

The man turned toward the woods in the west and whistled. Almost before he'd ceased his screeching, a rider broke from the woods, he and his mount leading two horses.

"Sorry, Marshal," the darkie woman said.

The waylayers guffawed so hard at that they almost sounded to be choking.

"Mamma's biscuits!" Skinny Man slapped his knee. "I think I mighta pissed myself a bit!"

"Sorry doesn't seem at all adequate, little missy," the leader said between bouts of laughter. "You done killed the good lawman there with all your crashing about and yelping. I don't imagine that puts him in a forgiving mood."

"Don't know about that," Hostetter said. "I'm a pious Christian."

The third outlaw rode up to his friends, releasing the extra horses to each as they took the reins. This latest arrival was a big-bellied ogre with arms as thick as most men's thighs. He was probably the weak link, having been left back with the mounts.

The leader boosted onto the worn, black saddle of a chestnut stallion with a flash between its eyes.

"Fine horse you got there," Hostetter said to the leader. "Where'd you get it?"

The men laughed. Fat Boy turned to the leader and slapped his shoulder. "Y'all hear that, Mr. Southerman? He done asked where you got it. Har!"

"Nice rifle, too," Hostetter said.

The men laughed even harder.

"You know these people?" The girl protectively embraced the boy.

"I reckon we've met. But I surely recognize my mount and kit."

"I reckon you do," Southerman called. "I also reckon you ain't too smart."

"Oh? How you figure?"

"Well, first time we met, we caught you nappin'. Second time we catch you an' your gang here makin' a ruckus."

"They ain't my gang, and they made the ruckus."

"Well now." The man leaned on his saddle horn. "That's what we call one of them Samantha technicalities."

"That's semantic, you mo-ron. Miss Whoever-you-are, stay behind me, and both y'all hold on to me, no matter what."

"Why?" the girl asked.

"Cause I'm just about to shoot him down," Southerman explained, "an' he's wantin' somebody for his carcass to fall on."

"So's it won't git bruised," Skinny Man elaborated, and guffawed.

"He don't want to crack his blowed-out haid on no rock," Fat Boy added, and joined in his partner's merriment.

Southerman shook his head, cradling it in one hand. He clearly harbored only limited appreciation of the humors of his gang.

"You boys listen up," the marshal said. "You are ordered to stand down and submit to arrest in the name of the United States gov'ment."

The men alongside Southerman paused in their braying display of humor, stared, then exploded into renewed peals of hilarity.

"Shut your holes!" Southerman pointed to a spot in front of the house, a few feet from Hostetter's gaggle.

"Aww, boss, we want to help kill the lawman..." Fat Boy complained.

"I'll kill the lawman, you aim the lightnin' post. Now git."

"Aww, boss..."

Southerman waggled the rifle at Fat Boy. "You want to tell *him* you shirked your job, or do I shoot you right now, as a mercy?"

"Aww, ain't no need to git all like that," Skinny Man whined. "We goin', we goin'..."

Hostetter watched the two underlings as they ambled their horses toward the spot Southerman indicated.

"See, lawman." Southerman slid the rifle into its sheath near the saddle horn. "You done interrupted a delicate operation."

"Also an illegal one," Hostetter said.

Southerman drew a pistol from his gunbelt. "Legalities don't concern me. Accuracy does. It ain't no easy matter aiming one of them lightnin' posts. You don't do it right, you don't know *what* might happen. Oh, wait a minute. You likely don't know what a lightnin' post is, do you, lawman?"

Skinny Man and Fat Boy took rocks from burlap bags hanging from their saddles and plopped them onto the ground almost at Hostetter's feet. The rocks were black and reflected in the moonlight. "No," the marshal said, "don't know what you talkin' about."

"It's hard work, lawman. Like, we had to kill all them cows, and drag 'em around to just the right spots to map out the blast, and even then the first strike was off by almost two mile..."

Hostetter spared a lazy look over to the house. "You count different from me."

"Oh. That there's the second strike. We're getting close. The iron, it don't work as precisely as I might like, but, well..."

"Shoulda used silver."

"Really. I thought you said you didn't know about no lightnin' posts. Well, don't matter none. We ain't got bags and bags of silver. The iron, it's just laying around on the ground in these parts. Kinda prissy,

though. You have to adjust and adjust. It's gone nigh on twenty-four hours-- But I'm boring you, ain't I? Where's my manners?"

Southerman sat up straight in his saddle and cocked his pistol.

"Porthos, snake!" Hostetter yelled to Southerman's mount.

Southerman yelped as the horse reared under him. He flew from the saddle despite his desperate grab for the reins. His pistol pinwheeled into the dark.

Hostetter faced the other two outlaws. He crouched and pointed the top of his stick at Skinny Man. He steadied the stick, leaned back, and slammed the butt end into the dirt.

A blast erupted from the top of the stick. It twisted about itself, liquidly, like a tornado of luminescence, leaping into the direction of aim. It slammed into Skinny Man, ejecting him from his horse. The man hurtled, arms flapping, until he plummeted to the ground forty feet away at the edge of the crop circle arcing across the farm.

As his boss fell to the ground, desperately trying to avoid his horse's hooves, Fat Boy snatched out his pistol and sent two shots in Hostetter's direction. Dirt jumped at the marshal's feet and splinters flew from the body of the stick, but he brought the staff to bear on Fat Boy and blasted him from his mount.

"By all that's treasured!" the girl exclaimed.

"Holy shit!" the boy added.

"Porthos!" the marshal called, and sent a shrill whistle between his teeth.

The horse whinnied, left off terrorizing its erstwhile rider, and drew alongside.

Hostetter threw himself into the saddle. "Come on, get up!" he ordered the girl and the kid, and tried to keep the horse still. He thrust the stick into its specially designed sheath, right next to the rifle.

The boy scrambled up the horse like a monkey but the girl was a comedy of ineptitude. "What in hell--?" Hostetter complained. "Ain't you never got on a horse?"

"Help me! It's too big!"

A rumble groaned to life in the earth, a deep vibration that made the badmen's iron rocks dance against the dirt. Porthos fidgeted, tossing his head. The horse neighed and stamped.

Hostetter grabbed the girl's arm, tugged, then reached as fast as he could with one hand to grasp a handful of dress and heave her higher.

"Lawman!" Southerman called. He scrambled to his knees, fumbling about for his pistol. He fell onto his face once, shaken by the unsteady earth.

The girl squealed as she clung to the flank of the anxious horse. The boy groped for her. Hostetter glanced around for signs, for some indication of the source of the trembling earth. He couldn't run with that woman hanging there like a sack of potatoes, and he couldn't stay.

"Damn and hellfire!" he bellowed. He stepped his horse in among the dancing iron rocks. He grabbed his marshal's badge from the lapel of his vest and held it up to the sky. A vibration hummed through his body. The horse's mane stood on end. "Hold on!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Hold on, for the love o' God!"

An orange star winked in the night sky, then hammered its light onto them.



Heat, cold, weightlessness. Hostetter dug his boots into the ribcage of his horse, else they might have drifted apart. White light engulfed him, a blaze so intense it burned the eyes even through tight-shut lids. Just before the whiteness washed everything away, a rider passed. As marshal, horse, and hangers-on entered the light, the rider left it. He was a figure as black as death with something smaller, more terrible, leading him. Then came a cascade of images, things, people tumbling through blinding fog: men on violent, loud contraptions, bicycles, kind of, imbued with kaleidoscopic lightning. The light hurled them after the dark man. Then there was nothing but the agonizing brightness.

The colored woman screamed. The boy let loose a continuous, warbling "Whoa-o-oh!" The world roared like a giant twister eating a town.

Then, blinking and gasping, they stood in green grass in broad daylight, surrounded by a ring of tall, rectangular stones.

Another burst of light, a distinct sense of rising and of liquored-up dreams.

The stink of jungle jumped at them. Stair steps appeared beneath the horse, no, not stairs, but the stair-stepped side of a building. An almost naked brown man stared at them, his eyes wide. He held a bloody knife. He held something else bloody in his other hand. The horse, without footing, fell over onto its side, screaming.

Light. A stretching, a pulling apart of their bodies, like they were made of warm taffy. Bone, muscle, and screams drew out through tunneled space.

Red desert, a razor-like mountain behind them.

Light. A momentary, eternal assurance of peace. Warmth in the vibrating chaos of their sweating bodies. Weightless again.

A stone, skeletal church, the ceiling as tall as Heaven itself. They landed in the aisle atop the panicked horse, red and blue streams of sunlight through the windows. A thousand, maybe two thousand people gasped, leaned away, or scurried from the horse's hooves.

Light. Weight. Falling, falling. This was going to hurt.

Rock, weeds. Porthos, done with it, shrugged them all from his back. He careened about, bucking, his eyes wild.

Hostetter sat up. He looked to his badge, then grunted and flicked it away. The silver emblem rattled on rock, almost dropping into a crevice. It glowed white hot. Hostetter's fingers burned.

"What in Sam Hill--!" the boy exclaimed.

Hostetter and the girl climbed unsteadily to their feet. They patted themselves down and dusted themselves off. All about them spread uneven rock, sprigs of weeds, and a black sky punched by a full moon.

"What happened?" the girl asked. She went to the thunderstruck boy and started patting him down, as well.

"I imagine you know," Hostetter answered.

"A better question: where are we?"

They staggered outward from where they had landed, avoiding the bucking, stamping horse. They reached a precipice, heavily crevassed. Hostetter looked left and right along the drop-off. The edge of rock marked a long, ragged curve.

"I tried to control it," Hostetter said, "get us away from that maniac, but not too far, maybe to the mountain."

"*This* is a mountain," the girl said.

"Yeah, I reckon, but the wrong one."

Below, far below, the land rolled out in lines of pine and a grass carpet blue in the moonlight. A silvery river wound through grass and red rock outcroppings. Hostetter edged to the drop-off and peered down into a rockfall rimming a face that looked clawed by a giant bear.

"Where are we?" the girl asked again.

"Devil's Tower," Hostetter answered. "In Wyoming."

"Hell's bells!" cried the kid.