

Mystery of the Dead

“ Damn! Flies get away!” the words from a bloody mess of a man lying inside the remnants of a stage coach at the bottom of Cody Ravine just south of Raton Pass in New Mexico Territory. Totally confused and half naked with just remnants of underwear and shirt left on his body. Bruised and scraped in fifty places, he hurt everywhere. Dried blood covered the side of his face from a gunshot wound that he soon found had taken off his right ear. The bloody mess had luckily quit bleeding before he died from loss of blood. He had no memory of what happened. Why he was here and why he was alive. Maybe he wasn’t and didn’t know it. Slowly he climbed to his feet and looked around. Nothing made any sense. the stage coach lay crumpled and destroyed. It appeared that it had fallen down the steep sidewall of the Ravine. There were three dead bodies under the wreckage. Frightened now as he began to realize he had no memory past just waking up. Racking his brain for anything. There was nothing. He couldn’t say who he was ; not even a name . he became really scared. Sitting back down and now really depressed, he had no idea how he knew it, but a severe shock to the brain could cause memory loss. It was at this point he discovered his missing ear and his moving around had started the wound bleeding again. Looking around for something to wrap his head, he found a small trunk that had survived the crash. Inside he found women things that made a good wrap for his head.

The three bodies had been shot , apparently killed before the Coach fell into the Ravine. Curiously, he began to examine things, but his head hurt terribly and he soon moved into the shade made by the remnants of the coach. Dragging a bag from the crumpled luggage boot , he punched it around some and lay down using it for his aching head. Mercifully , he passed out and it was morning when he came awake to find that his horrible experience was no dream. It was a real live nightmare surrounded by pain everywhere on his body.He needed water badly and fortunately found two canteens that had survived. Still confused about his lack of memory, he searched through the coach for food or anything he might use. A small pack of jerky was better than

nothing and once again he lay down in the shade and suffered with the pain. Unable to see the damage to his head, he was afraid to touch it and left it tightly bandaged. Once again after water and a couple pieces of jerky, he passed out sleeping through most of the day.

Waking in the late afternoon, he wished he was still asleep. The terrible pain was still there, but he realized that he wasn't going to die. He had to start thinking of his predicament and how to survive. The flies were terrible and he had to do something about the bodies of the three men. It was curious that the older man had been shot in the head like himself, the other two had died from close range shots to the body. There were powder burns around the bullet wounds. . He needed something to wear. It was getting on toward evening and getting cold.

Ransacking everything, he found a pair of almost new forty fives with boxes of shells in one of the small trunks. He was shocked and surprised to find the woman's trunk was almost too heavy to lift. Dumping it out, he soon discovered that it had a false bottom and the contents had to be gold as heavy as it was. He was thinking, "What do you do when you don't know anything?" he decided that he might not know his name , but he knew a lot about gold. He very carefully repacked everything in the trunk and carried it to the side wall of the ravine and buried it in a shower of gravel and dirt. His thinking was; with that much gold, the killing of those others and the shot he had taken had to be somehow tied to that small woman's trunk. He was still looking for clothes to wear when he noticed the older dead man was about his size and though it was a grizzly job he undressed the body to get the man's pants, shirt and as an after thought, the boots. The bodies he drug fifty feet away and covered with gravel and dirt. There was no identity on either man. He was thinking, " The killer was careless or he would be dead also. This older man , probably in his forties, had been shot twice. He carefully searched everything for some clue as to who he was. Who was he and where did he come from. He had no idea. The older man was wearing a fancy gun belt and holster. He strapped it around his waist. It felt familiar and he put one of the forty fives in it.

Looking further at the Ravine walls, it looked like about a fifty foot drop from above. He counted himself lucky to be alive. Thinking about it that word lucky almost rang a bell. " Maybe that was his

name. Probably wasn't but it fit until he could remember his." It was while studying the surroundings, he saw another small trunk lying half buried in gravel that showered down with the coach. Taking it out of its resting place, he knew right away what he would find. Yes, it was more women's clothes and another false bottom filled with gold. Only this time there was a small bag of gold coins and a letter in the trunk to Annie Billings , Dodge City from Jake Love. " Bingo! He knew of Jake Love! Gunfighter ! credited with killing a dozen men , not counting Indians and Mexicans." Putting the letter back, he kept the gold coins and took the trunk to the burial place of the other trunk. This time showering down half a ton of dirt and gravel. Once again he called it an early evening and lay down.

Morning brought a surprise. He was hidden under the coach wreckage when he heard voices coming from the roadway up above. It was easy to hear them in the early morning and one man said, " Ray, that stupid brother of yours got the wrong damn trunks. They belonged to that city feller wearing store bought clothes. That sure was some nice guns he was carrying. I guess Johnny Boy figured the heavy weight was the gold. He was too busy stealing the man's store bought clothes to check what he was getting We gotta git down there and get the right trunks. We'll have to go back to Cody Valley and come in from there. I hate to do it because it's just this side of Raton Pass . We sure don't wanna be seen in town just yet, remember; we're supposed to be in Mexico. I don't think there's any other way to git down there. One things for sure , ain't nobody else to worry about. Nobody knows about this stage and it can't be seen from the road up here" Ray replied, " Jim, you're a great partner, we'll be running gold through our hands come nightfall. Grab that pack horse and you drag him along for awhile. That owl headed bastard has been nothing but trouble every since I rented him. Let's go!"

The man that now knew himself as Lucky, was trying to figure a way out without getting caught and possibly killed by these outlaws. He was thinking, " I must be that city dude they were talking about and why would I have been carrying two trunks of fancy guns. Don't make no sense Mister Lucky, but cain't worry about that right now . gotta find a place to hide. They headed north so I better go that way too, this ravine looks like a dead end and this Cody Valley should have

some place I can hide out.” He began hoofing it , but not without a lotta pain. Couldn’t hardly stand it, but knew if he wanted to live , he had to keep walking. It was close to noon before he began to see trees and low brush he could hide in. It was a welcome sight and he stopped in a grove of small Pinon pines with heavy undergrowth. Thankfully, he lay down and rested. Those two canteens were a life saver.

Hours later and half asleep he heard riders coming and the man called Ray was complaining, “ Jim my hands are killing me . That damn rental pack horse of ours jerked the lead from me fifty times. There has to be something wrong with that horse. I’m glad you left him back yonder. Do you reckon we can handle the gold on our horses; it’s pretty heavy you know. Johnny swore that he had the right trunks. How was he to know that city feller was selling guns. His trunks were sure heavy enough.” Jim replied, “ Yeah, we might have a problem without a pack horse, but I sure ain’t gonna drag him back to the livery. On our way back , I’ll shoot the bastard and grab our stuff. I’ll tell that liveryman , he died on us.”

Lucky remained well hidden until they were out of sight and hurting as he was, he followed their trail north. He was trying to figure what the two outlaws would do when they found no trunks of gold. “ Probably stay over looking everywhere and be shocked to find the buried bodies. Who buried them and where was the gold? That’ll give me time to get to Raton Pass and find a doctor maybe.” It was another hour of painful walking when he suddenly heard the whinny of a horse. Tied to a tree was the outlaws pack horse. He went to the animal and right away noticed the horse had something wrong with a back foot. He was holding it on the toe and keeping weight off. His pack saddle was over to one side and Lucky quickly adjusted it. Looking at his back foot, there was a sharp pointed stone wedged in the frog, between folds and it’s color probably made it hard to see. Lucky found that he loved horses and had a compassion for this one and said, “Owl, I’m gonna turn you loose. I think you’ll be ok now, but I’ve gotta get going. You take it easy and you’ll be fine.” Lucky walked away expecting the horse to begin grazing, but it didn’t; instead it began to follow him. In a hundred yards, Lucky was using the pack saddle to hold onto as the two walked out of Cody Valley toward the town of Raton Pass. He knew that the horse’s foot would be sore for riding

and he wasn't sure he could mount up anyway. He made much better time and it was early evening when he turned the horse he called Owl loose near the livery stable .Owl was home and now Lucky went looking for a doctor . He wondered how he seemed to know this town. He had to have been here before. At his first question to a man coming from a saloon, he was directed to Doc Evans home.

Evans was having dinner , but quickly took Lucky to his office and began to examine his wound. Lucky thought it best not to tell the Doc of his narrow escape or anything concerning the stage coach or what now appeared to have been a robbery. He realized his life would be immediately in danger if any one found out that he had lived through the incident. His story to the Doc was, “ I think it was a hunting accident. Some one didn't see me in the background and I got shot. I just figure I'm lucky to be alive.”

Evans said, “ First time I've had to treat a gunshot wound like yours. You've lost most of your ear. I'm surprised you can still hear with it. I've gotta tell you though, you won't be hearing much for a week or so . I've stitched up what I could, but the swelling will close it up for awhile. I'm sorry, but it's the best I can do. It ain't pretty and never will be.” Lucky said “ Doc, I wish you wouldn't say anything about this for awhile, I'd like to find the Bastard that shot me. “ Doc said he understood and great fully accepted the five dollar coin. He said, “ You sure look familiar, maybe it's the clothes. I'd almost sware I've met you before.” Lucky replied, “ It's possible, I've been this way before, I was with my wife, maybe you remember her. A Pretty red headed girl” Doc replied, ‘ No I guess not, I have a great memory for women folk and a pretty red head would stay with me for years.” Doc was shaking his head,but also insisted Lucky come back to get fresh bandages every day for a week. Lucky knew how to divert someone's thinking. He didn't want to be remembered, especially if it was remembered that he was on that stage. He had to laugh , sayin to himself, “ I ain't married but I had a red headed girl friend one time. The only trouble was too many men remembered her. I'm lucky that she's a memory.”

Finding a bed in the local Flop house, he was able to order food be brought to his room and for the following week, he remained out of sight of most folks. His long black hair and heavy beard helped

disguise the fact that he had been wounded. The bandaging was mostly overlooked. He was very thankful that he had found that small bag of gold coins and it would keep him going for a good while.

The news finally broke that there had been a stage disappearance and all passengers and everyone on board had disappeared. There was no information or reports of Indian activity. The passengers were identified and when Lucky heard this he headed immediately for the Stage office wearing a large bandage which covered half of his face. Maybe now he could find out who he was. The information he received; Jake Love the gunfighter had been a passenger and a partner Joe Billings. The stage driver, Bill Case and one other man a young city feller was not identified, but thought to be a gun salesman from back east. It was believed that the stage broke from the four horse team and ran off the roadway into one of the deep canyons which ran parallel to the roadway in a hundred places. The four horse team was found a few miles east of the little town of Las Vegas but all were still harnessed together. Fear of the local Indian activity and difficulty getting down into the bordering canyons prevented a thorough search of the roadway. Lucky knew that he must have been that salesman. That didn't help much; he still had no name and no idea who he was working for, but now at least he was seeing there was a connection between Joe Billings, Jake Love and the letter from Annie Billings. It made no sense.

Disappointed , but beginning to get answers helped his peace of mind. He desperately wished that he had all the answers thinking, “ I can't even ask questions without becoming a target. I'll go to Dodge and look up this Annie, maybe she can give me some answers. The gold can stay right where it's at, but I've got another problem. The stage drivers and station workers might recognize me if I take the stage. I can't take that chance. I've gotta stay outta sight until I can get some answers. A hundred pounds of gold is plenty reason to kill for. I've gotta get an outfit and a horse.” Lucky headed for the Livery. An old soldier from the big war was running things and when Lucky told him he was short on cash, but would be willing to put in a few weeks work to buy a horse. the ol'soldier said, “ Names Sam stranger, but it don't look to me like you're in any shape for work. You must be that feller Doc told me about. Look here I've got an old horse that I

could let go for twenty dollars and I'll throw in an ol'hull and blanket. Can you make that figure? I really don't need the help. I've gotta get rid of that old black over there. Had to give back rental on him just a week ago. Wasn't worth a damn as a pack horse, but if you're willin to work with him and travel light, he'll still get you down the road a good piece. Don't know why them fellers had so much trouble with him, but if I can't use him for rent. He's gotta go; pretty much hog feed if he ain't worth twenty dollars. I ain't got feed for anything I cain't rent out." Lucky replied, I'm a little short but how about fifteen, I got that." "Done!" said Sam and Lucky led the horse he'd named Owl toward the mercantile. " Yeah." He was thinking, "My luck is really holding out, guess I picked the right name. Ol'Owl is much better than hog feed."

Later that evening, he camped on a small creek and sat thinking about his predicament , while Owl grazed. Still no answers. He knew a lot about horses, camping out, and the guns were very familiar in his hands. Yeah, he figured that he was that gun salesman on the stage, but the blank was still there about his name and memory of the robbery. Jake Love had to be the older man and Joe Billings would be somehow related to Annie in Dodge. Still recovering from the stage wreck, he turned in early. He tried his best to recall what had happened to him, but there was nothing he could remember, beyond waking up in that coach.

He would be a long three weeks getting into Dodge, ol'Owl wasn't the problem. It was him. Too many sore places to heal up before going on. Three weeks on the trail and Lucky was ready for a good meal. His bag of coins still held a few dollars and he stopped at Ma Green's Kitchen. This was the first eating place he came to as he rode into Dodge. His ear was still in the healing stages and he wore a wrap around his head to protect it . The place was crowded and Lucky was thinking of moving on to somewhere else when a man jumped to his feet pointing at him exclaiming, "Jake Love!" and immediately bolted out the back door. Lucky was stunned! He in surprise said, " Not me! That man's crazy. My name's Lucky." The lady behind the counter said, " Come on in , stranger. That was Johnny Boy Riles. He had a bad run in with Jake just three weeks ago. He's lucky to be alive. You do favor Jake a little bit. I'm sure you scared Johnny Boy.

He was pale as a ghost and I've never seen him run so fast. Take a seat over there. What's your pleasure?"

Lucky thanked Ma Green and ordered a meal. He was thinking, "Damn the luck, Johnny Boy was in on the robbery and murders. I'm wearing Jake's outfit and this fancy gun belt was really a big mistake. I can expect trouble now. I should never have come in here. When I leave it'll have to be by the back door." Lucky without thinking checked his gun. It seemed like a natural thing to do. Men on both sides of him got up and left.

Later as he left the eating house, he felt a chill come over him! "Someone was watching the back door!" He quickly scrambled sideways and dived headlong into an alleyway behind a saloon. Two shots rang out as he flattened on the ground. He saw the gun flash, but waited shooting. There was no target and any shots he fired would give away his location, He held his breath and lay still. He lay there amazed that he felt no fear or sense of anger. Maybe he'd lost a lot more than his memory. No one moved into his sight and he heard voices from the Saloon sharply exclaiming , " Get the sheriff! Damnit , don't shoot! ." Instantly Lucky was shocked! His memory came crashing down on him. That " Damnit Billie! don't shoot!" came ringing back to him. " the stage coach robbery when Jake Love made that exclamation!" just as he passed out from the shot to his head. Yes , he remembered talking to Love and Joe Billings as they left the town of Raton Pass. He remembered the Hold Up as two outlaws stood outside the coach holding guns on the three passengers. He was shot from behind! The driver was the killer. He was Billie. Had to be , there was no one else there. My God ! Now what? Gotta think, everything's crazy. They're still trying to kill me. Gotta get outta here. I don't want to see no Sheriff. I've got enough trouble. Johnny Boy thought I was Jake Love and must have brought in the other killers They're out there somewhere. I've gotta hide."

On hands and knees , he began crawling toward the back steps of the saloon. He'd seen that it was up off the ground with enough room for him to crawl under. Men boiled from the Saloon and were milling around the alleyway. There was a lot of yelling going on and when the Sheriff arrived with a lantern looking around. Lucky overheard him saying, " Ma Green says she thought it was Johnny Boy

trying to kill Love. They had a big disagreement a few weeks back and it could have led to this shooting. Nothing to see now . There's no body out here. We'll take a look in the morning."

Lucky lay hidden thinking, " Gotta figure this out. Yeah, my name ain't Lucky, it's Luke Stoddard Colt Manufacturing pistols salesman from Hartford Connecticut. I was in route to Santa Fe with a pistol shipment for the Rafter "L" Cattle Ranch The law around here frowns on gun salesmen. Too many going to the Indians. The sheriff would not be happy to know why I was in New Mexico Territory with two trunks full of pistols. He now knew why the name Lucky had hit a nerve with him. he was an expert shooter and most folks back east knew him as Lucky Luke. They also knew him to be a fearless Deputy Marshall that was fired for befriending an immigrant Irishman wanted by the law. Lucky had known of the man's innocence and when he was cleared , the State wanted him back, but it was time for a change. This job opportunity had come up and he took it. At the moment it looked like a giant mistake. What do I do now? Find Annie Billings."

Lucky lay hidden until Ma Green closed up and then cautiously made his way to her back door and knocked. Ma was shocked to see him, but he quickly assured her that he was Ok and asked about a lady named Annie Billings. Ma exclaimed , " Stay clear of that woman! She's poison. Three men have died working for her and rumors say her brother Joe has been killed also. Mister , whoever you are, walk the other way. Everyone in town is praying she'll leave Dodge before another man dies for her. Cut and run and don't look back. Forget you ever heard of her." Lucky replied, " Thanks Ma, but I gotta find her, she owes me money.' Ma replied, " She's stayin at the Branch house, too snooty for my rooms; but don't let anyone know I told you about her. It ain't healthy. Folks say she's loaded with money, but I don't know about that. Good luck to you." Lucky replied , "That's my name, Thanks Ma."

Later finding Annie was easy and upon his knock on her door, he was startled to meet a beautiful lady almost his own age. Struck , at first with her beauty he said, "Miss Annie Billings?" The rough answer he got was also surprising as she replied. " Yeah! Who the hell are you ? Whatta you want?" Lucky getting that angry response began thinking he might ought to go slow ,replied, " I'm Luke Stoddard, I

knew your brother Jim. I buried him.” Immediately her whole attitude changed to absolute sweetness as she said, “ Oh my God you knew him! He’s dead?” Lucky replied , “ Yes, I’m sorry that I have to bring you this news, but I was with him in a horrible stage robbery. I was lucky to come out alive. No , before you ask, I don’t know a thing about it or who did the robbery. I was shot from behind after getting from the coach. I was lucky to live through the ordeal of the shooting and I have no idea how I survived the drop over a cliff. I’m only here because I remembered Jim telling me about you here in Dodge. We talked some after leaving Raton Pass and I came to let you know what happened to him and Jake Love that was with him. Tonight one of the stage coach robbers tried to kill me when I stopped at Ma Green’s to get a meal. I recognized him. I haven’t gone to the Sheriff in Raton Pass or trusted anyone. Two men came riding into the canyon with a pack horse as I made my way back to town, I was afraid to let anyone know I was alive. I’m a gun salesman and the thieves took everything including my clothes. When I came awake in the wreckage of the coach at the bottom of the cliff I was cold and took Jake Love’s clothes. He, your brother and the stage driver were killed. I managed to get their bodies over to a wash and covered from animals.” Annie appeared shocked and exclaimed, “ Oh my God Mister Stoddard! I have feared for days that something dreadful happened to Jim! Jake was his body guard. You say they are both dead. Could you tell me where he is buried? We really didn’t get along too good, but I would at least have a marker put on his grave. Cody Ravine , you say. That’s right outta Raton Pass. Look I can’t thank you enough for coming to me. Do you recall what these men looked like that rode in with the pack horse?’

Lucky replied, “better than that their names were Ray and Jim, but I didn’t get a good look at either one. I think Jim was one of the robbers of the coach but I never saw his face.” Annie asked, “ Mister Stoddard, what are your plans. I can’t think straight right now and I’d love to hear more about Jim and anything else you might remember of the coach and robbery. Where are you staying?” Lucky replied, ‘ Don’t know for sure, just yet and it’s kinda late . I think I’ll just camp out and put something together tomorrow.” Annie said. “ One more question , Mister Stoddard if you don’t mind. Did you happen to see anything of two small trunks in the boot of the coach.” Lucky almost knew this

was coming and said, “ The boot was smashed badly, but there were a few small trunks near the coach. I can’t tell you a lot, I had to get help for my injuries and after covering the bodies I left right away. It was pure hell getting to Raton. I had lost a lotta blood and was very weak with terrible aches from bruising. I was darn lucky to find Doc Evans.” He once again accepted Annie’s Thanks and left.

That night camped in a grove outside of town, Lucky spent a lot of his time trying to remember everything, about himself and what had happened during the robbery. “ Yeah , he was Luke Stoddard and he had a history of law work as a Deputy . All of those years came tumbling back to him. He sat for hours just going back through his life and experiences . He was very thankful that he had miraculously regained his memory. One major relief he experienced as he remembered that he had a bank account he could draw from once the National bank in Dodge made contact with his bank in Hartford. His only problem there was the three to four weeks this would take. He needed to find work of some kind and that would be a big problem with Johnny Boy Riles wanting to kill him. Remembering the robbery, he tried to detail everything that had happened and who shot him. It had to be the stage coach driver, but he was dead, so he wouldn’t get any answers there. The driver was buried along with Jake Love and Jim Billings. He worried the problem long into the evening , but finally gave it up. There was something he was overlooking and he knew it was there, but what was it? The gold was safe until he could find the killers. Maybe then he could see to it that Annie got the gold, it was probably hers, but he had immediately taken a dislike and couldn’t trust her. Her reactions were not right. He was glad that he had withheld the details he was aware of. Too many questions and everyone a dead end. He was thinking, “ Reckon I’ve been a lawman too long, but there has to be some answers for why all four of us were shot. Johnny Boy tried to kill me tonight , but he’ll be pulled off when it’s known that I might be the only link to the gold. I’ve gotta find him and get some answers.”

Lucky remembered seeing two riders with three horses stopped just off the trail. They had appeared to be waiting for the stage to pass. The roadway was very narrow running along the edge of what he now knew was Cody Ravine. When shots were fired, by the killers, the

driver slammed on the break, pulling the team to a stop. They were ordered out, It was a Hold Up!. It was at this point Jake had yelled , “ Damnit Billie! don’t shoot!” Lucky remembered the sound of shots just before he heard Love’s yell, then blackness and coming awake piled between dead bodies in the smashed coach. That was every detail he could remember. That shots he heard could not have been the one hitting the side of his head. It had to be another, before he was shot. They had to load him and the others in the coach before rolling it into the canyon. He went looking for Johnny Boy.

Bad news, Johnny had left Dodge and Annie had notified the Sheriff that he , Lucky was in town and a survivor of a stage hold up that killed Jake Love the gunfighter and outlaw. Dodge business man Jim Billings was also killed and because he had been an important figure in Dodge, the Sheriff wanted details. Lucky figured that he was right about Annie. She knew that he was looking for answers and put the Sheriff on him as a suspect in the robbery.

At this time Luke Short was Sheriff and found him at Ma Green’s . He had taken a room there because Ma had given him credit. Short asked for all the details and Lucky gave him a rundown of the events without mention of the trunks. He did let Short know that Johnny Boy Riles was one of the killers and had stolen his two trunks of new pistols. He also told Short that Jake had yelled for Billie to Stop shooting . Short agreed that he was yelling at Bill Case, the driver. He said however, “ Mister Stoddard, I’ve heard the name Billie used somewhere before. I can’t remember the incident, but it seemed strange at the time. Maybe it’ll pop on me and if it does I’ll let you know. At any rate Bill Case is dead. He was a good driver, lived in Raton Pass. I saw a lot of him after a stage robbery he was involved in. He was a good man. Has a wife and kids. He just don’t fit the picture of a killer. Annie came to me and seems to think you may be causing her trouble. She’s a hard woman and actually hated her brother for being so successful with his gold mining company. I’ve heard he sold out and was heading for Santa Fe. There had to be a lotta gold on that stage. Somebody got away with a fortune. Anyway, Thanks for your time and please keep me informed if you come up with anything.”

Lucky was thinking after Short left, “ My old instincts are right. I’m thinking more and more Ma Green is right. Annie is not to be

trusted with any information. Johnny Boy is my best bet for answers. If I can find him, I think I can scare him into talking. He sure jumped and ran outta Ma Green's. I'm kinda surprised that he was the one shooting at me. I'm glad one of Ma's customers saw him leave the alleyway, I didn't think he had the guts. I'll see how brave he is if I can track him down."

Two days on the trail to Raton Pass and a freight wagon coming north with a military escort provided him with information that Johnny Boy was working at a stage coach change station fifteen miles out of Raton Pass. Days later nearing the station, Lucky had changed his outfit and now resembled a Mexican Rider. It was easy for him to get all the way in the station yard without causing a problem. He spotted Johnny harnessing a team for change over when the next stage rolled in. He didn't realize the dumb mistake he had made. He was still wearing Jake Love's fancy gun belt. It almost cost him his life. Suddenly a bullet splintered the hitch rail he was going to tie up and another hit the nearby water trough. Johnny had spotted him and jumped astride the team horse he was leading and bolted out of the yard, throwing shots at Lucky as he raced away.

Jumping up on his horse, Lucky raced after Johnny hoping to catch up and take him down. Lucky was surprised by the racing speed of ol'Owl and quickly closed on him. Johnny turned around and fired back at Lucky missing, Lucky began shooting and brought Johnny crashing to the ground. Jumping off, he kept a close eye on Johnny expecting more shooting, but Johnny had ran off into a dense grove of brush and a bullet from him stopped Lucky in his tracks; his jacket jerked sideways. Johnny's bullet had caught his jacket sleeve. A few inches to the left and he realized, the chase would be over for him. He had to get smarter; that Johnny Boy was pretty good with a gun. Thankfully he didn't have a rifle and Lucky decided to stay right where he was and watch for movement in the brush. The minutes went by and Lucky was beginning to think Johnny had cleared the brush, but suddenly there was a violent movement thirty feet in front. Lucky moved cautiously forward expecting a trap, but the shaking quit and parting the brush there lay Johnny. He was hit bad high in the chest. There was no fight left in him, he was dying! Quickly going to him, he saw the wound and knew he wouldn't make it, but said, " Johnny I'll

help if I can . Tell me . Who shot me? Who shot me?” Johnny still thinking Lucky was Jake Love struggled to say “” Jake- you- kill- Jim. Billie shoot. Lucky practically screaming in Johnny’s ear, “Who, Damnit Johnny ,who Billie who, Billie who!” too late, Johnny was dead. The life was leaving the body, he had breathed his last. Lucky had to take Johnny’s body back to the station and explain the shooting. He searched the body for anything and pocketed two double eagles and some small silver from his pockets. He figured Johnny wouldn’t be needing it and it was probably his anyway. He knew that he was carrying travel money when the stage was attacked. The manager wasn’t happy with the explanation of Johnny’s attempt to kill him ,but he was really unhappy when he had to dig a hole to bury him. Lucky was thinking, “ Didn’t want to kill the man. Still don’t have any answers. What’s next? Raton Pass.”

Later that evening , Lucky was at the stage station in town asking about a shotgun rider for the coach that disappeared with Jake Love and Jim Billings. The station manager in reply to Lucky’s question, said, “ Yes, but it was Jake Love’s man. Was his name Billie? I Don’t know. It might have been. He was an extra guard for this run. They had all tried to keep it secret, but everyone knew there was a lotta gold in that coach. Everyone feels sure that all on board that stage are dead. Yeah, Bill Case was often called Billie, but mister , you’re barking up the wrong tree. Bill was a well respected man and didn’t carry a pistol. Never owned one that I know of. Always had a rifle pretty handy though. His loss is a real tragedy for his wife May . It’s gonna be tough for her, They have two little kids.’ Lucky asked, “ Where can I find her? I wanna know about his rifle. I might be interested in buying one.” Lucky was thinking, “ Not likely ,but who knows. Some men are fantastic with a rifle.” Receiving directions he rode out of town to the Case homestead. Knowing that Mrs. Case would be having a tough time with two small kids, he stopped by the mercantile and bought a few groceries, thinking it would help to get answers. As an after thought, a couple pieces of hard candy.

Coming into the cabin roadway, he caught his breath as he was halted by a pretty woman standing in the doorway with a rifle. Thinking, “ He couldn’t believe his eyes and thought , “A girl like her, out here alone. My God this is Crazy ! Guess this answers the

question. Bill left his rifle home for the wife.” Lucky yelled back a greeting and asked to ride on in and told her he was Luke Stoddard, investigating the death of her husband Bill Case. He had some questions, but he said, “Mrs. Case, if you’ll feel better ,I’ll stay on my horse.” May replied, “ No get down and take a seat, I’ll get you a drink. I know how to use this rifle.” Lucky laughed saying, “ Lady , you’re my kind of people. It has been a dry ride. Thank you.” He took an immediate liking to her.

Once seated and the rifle pointed away from him, Lucky said, “Mrs. Case, I’m afraid I’m not the bearer of good news. I only came to put your mind to rest concerning Bill. I’m truly sorry , but Ma’am, he’s dead. I personally buried him.” He paused to give May time to really register what he had said. He could see the sadness shock and pain this brought her and felt it himself. Her two little boy’s were looking from the doorway curious, but not understanding what was being said. He softly said, “ May, if I might call you that, I have a terrible story to tell you. I’m truly sorry to hurt you this way, but you have to know. No one else has heard what I’m telling you and when I finish, you’ll understand why.” He waited for her comment and sipped a little water. Finally after a few moments, in a resigned voice she replied, “I prayed this news would never come. I held out desperate hope, but knew in my heart my loving Bill was dead, he would never come back.” She began crying and Lucky sat quiet and caring , knowing that she would swallow the hurt and try to go on. She was that kind of a woman. A few moments went by and between tearful eyes she said, “ Thank you Mister Stoddard. I’m sorry. Yes go ahead with the story.” Lucky replied, “May please call me Luke, Lucky Luke first names are friendlier.”

He began from where the coach was held up and told her the complete tale omitting the false bottom trunk secret of a fortune in gold. He knew that gold had a magic effect on some people. It was best not to make it a part of the story. He answered her questions and tried to shield her from the details of burial. Maybe she understood and didn’t want that on her mind. He related to her the fact that he believed from everything he knew, that the shot gun guard named Billie something had done the killing of Bill and the others. That he

was trying to find the man and bring him to justice, even if it meant another killing.

May was horrified that any one would think Bill was involved She absolutely refused to even consider that Bill would shoot anyone. Lucky could see the pain his visit had brought her and said, “ May I’ve got to go back to Raton Pass, but I’ll be back in a few days, maybe a week , but I will come back. I’ve got to look around and see if I can get any idea who this man Billie is. Look, I came here just to offer a little comfort when I was told you were out here with two small kids. You are a wonderful lady and I guess you’d say I’m kinda smitten with pretty girls”. He hated to ride away, but May was still in tears, then he remembered and said, “I’m packing a large bedroll as you can see. Thought you might need a few groceries and here’s two candies for the kids . ” May replied, “ Oh God! I really don’t know you, I don’t know you at all ,I can’t even think!” Lucky said,” I’ll be back”, as he rode away . He was thinking, “ Mighty pretty lady there Lucky ol’man . Yeah, kinda taken with her, ain’t you.”

Lucky talked to half the people in town, but got no further answers and was looking forward to seeing May again and rode again out the cabin. He was surprised at her story of a visitor and he felt instant resentment. She said, “Luke I’m sure you realize without Bill, I have no one to help . Almost breaking down she said to Lucky, “ Bob Porter must know something. He came out here wants me to serve drinks in his Saloon. I ran him off .Lucky, I can’t do that. I know what that will lead to. I’ll give up this homestead and go to Dodge to find work. It means the end of our dream for our kids, but I can get on at one of the big Mercantile there. It won’t be much, but it’ll be honest work anyway.” Lucky was surprised at the effect her story was having on him and replied, “ May, you strike me as a very lovely level headed woman. I would like you to remain here or nearby your place until I can clear up this robbery. I still feel threatened and someone wants me dead. You were a very pleasant surprise and someone I would love to know better”.

“. Think about it please, I’d very much like to help you.” May replied, “Give me a little while and maybe we can work something out. Please give it a few days. It’s been such a short while since Bill was killed. I know as a single mother I can’t make it out here. I know that I

need help and it's wonderful that you , not knowing me at all, would be so considerate. Thank you for everything. I'll be here for as long as we can make it. These groceries will hold us for a month. We'll be here when you get back and please be careful." Lucky laughed saying, " Good luck is my name girl and don't you worry. I gotta come back now, you're already worried about me." Lucky quickly gave her a quick pat on the arm, mounted and rode off. May watched until he was out of sight thinking , " Yes, he's awful sudden and plain spoken, but I guess he's right. I am worried for him."

Lucky rode into Dodge and once again stopped at Ma Green's place. This time Ma came over to set beside him asking how he was doing and he filled her in on everything that had happened since that first night in Dodge. She asked, " How did you make out with Annie ? You must have done Ok, you're still alive. Every man I know that's ever worked with her is now dead." Lucky replied, " Ma I've been in law enforcement most of my years and on my way back to Dodge I went over every detail of that stage robbery I told you about. I had overlooked one very important detail. Remember I told you that when I needed a bandage for my bloody ear ,I found a trunk with woman things I used. That Ma, was the key I was looking for and here I'd worn the damn thing for three days. Talk about dumb, those things were Annie's . Now you tell me , would you send your personals off in a trunk not knowing when or if you'd ever see them again. Ma there was a small sack of gold coins in that trunk! No I'm sure that Annie was involved in that stage robbery somehow. She had worked with Jake Love on many occasions in the past and with her brother Joe's death, she was to inherit the full proceeds of his gold mining operation. He had sold out for over a hundred thousand in gold bullion. I got it out of Johnny boy that Love killed her brother , but took a bullet himself before he was killed. For a long time I thought Bill Case was the killer that shot me and Jake in the head, but I can't prove that he didn't. Everything pointed to him, but he was shot in the left side at very close range.. I saw the powder burns when I buried him, so there had to be someone else on that stage coach. There was another man riding shotgun supposedly a friend of Jake Love. He had to be the wanton murderer of four men if I had died. Johnny Boy almost gave me the name of the killer, but couldn't get it spoken before he died. So

here I am, up the creek without a paddle as they say. I hate like Hell to get those trunks for her as nasty as she has been, but I don't have a lotta choice. That woman is evil ,has an awful mouth and don't care who gets in her way. I guess I'll be glad that it's over. There's a young widow in Raton Pass that I'd like to know better. I've run outta string on the robbery and ever locating the killer that shot me. It's time to put it away."

Ma said, "Lucky, those trunks of hers is the key to where the gold is. You've been gone and haven't heard the news. Annie hired Jose' Silva to locate her brother. That's been her story. Rumors are Ray Riles and Jim Hanks got away with her trunks and a fortune in gold that was on the coach in Annie's belongings. It belonged to her brother Jim. She say's he was murdered by Jim Hanks and Johnny Boy Riles and sent Jose' after Hanks and Riles to get the gold. It now belonged to her. Jose' agreed to take a few men and find Hanks and Ray Riles. Knowing Jose', I'd say he had no intention of getting the gold for Annie. He would be racing for the Border by now, but things didn't go as planned. I don't have all the details, but it's said that one of his own men shot him during a gunfight with Hanks and Riles. It's hard to see that happening, but I'd bet anything Annie had something to do with Jose's death. He was shot in the back during the gunfight. Hanks and Riles were both killed. No gold was found anywhere. Lucky, it's that same old story, there's no honor among thieves. It looks like Miss Annie is out of luck unless you come through for her."

Lucky replied, " Quite a story Ma, but Annie's been outta luck every since I met her. What you're telling me throws a little light on the robbery and I think we'll let the trunks rest until I see Annie's next move. She suspected that I knew something and I've known all along that she would like to see me killed, but didn't want to pull the trigger until she had her gold. Maybe she'll back off now."

Ma replied, "No Lucky, she won't quit. She'll have your every step watched and try to find something she can use as a bribe to get her gold. There'll be more killing and you can count on it I told you she was the worse kind and between her and Jake Love there were half a dozen stage robberies and killings that it was rumored they had a big hand in. A cold fear went over him as his immediate thoughts went to May and her two boys. " If she found out he had any concern for them,

They would disappear over night and he would be contacted with a bribe offer for their lives. God I can't let that happen!" Ma continued and provided the answer and justice Lucky was after. She said, "My son went to school with her. He and some of the other boys were almost afraid of her. She was a real Tom Boy competing with the boys for everything and a lotta times the team captains would pick her when it came to picking girls to fill up their team, they always picked Annie Billings first. The boys all called her "Billie!"

The End

Epilogue:

Following the revelation that Annie Billings could be the killer "Billie", Lucky was able to find a lady friend of Jake Love that identified Annie as the coach shotgun guard disguised as a man. Annie saved herself from hanging by confessing and claiming Jake Love forced her to be a part of the robbery and murder. It was her story that she accidentally shot Lucky ,while trying to kill Jake. She attempted to blame everything on the dead Jake, but Jake's girl friend, Dina, had witnessed her hiring Silva to hunt down Hanks and Riles and kill'em for her gold. Pure murder she was paying for and had been a member of Silva's band disguised as a man. She was happy to testify against Annie claiming that she had probably been Silva's killer, shooting him from behind during the gunfight. Lucky suspected a lot of jealousy there, but it helped the conviction. Ma Green insisted that she knew of the evil character of Annie, but was horrified to learn of her string of murders. There was no telling how many others had died at her hands.

Annie disguised as a man riding shotgun shot the driver, Bill Case sitting beside her , killing him as the passengers stepped out of the coach. Jake had yelled at her not to shoot, but Jim had jerked his gun out and shot Jake realizing that he was part of the robbery. Jake spun around , gun in hand shooting Jim. It appeared that Annie had planned on killing Jake all along for dumping her for the Saloon girl Dina and put a bullet in his head. Johnny Boy and Jim Hanks had brought horses for Jake,. Annie, and a pack horse for the gold. It was evident they had intended to kill Jim Billings , himself, and Bill Case,

leaving no witnesses. Johnny Boy made a mistake and Lucky Luke Stoddard lived to bring about Justice.

Just weeks following the Trial , Annie seduced one of the young Deputies, Fred Burroughs, and escaped Jail only to be captured by rogue Apaches. Burroughs was killed in the skirmish. Annie was never heard of again.

To anyone's knowledge, the gold bullion was never recovered, and became another lost treasure mystery. Lucky Luke Stoddard saw to it that Maybelline Case got the two small, but very heavy, trunks of women's things. Annie was a fancy dresser and most of her clothes were new; some of which May later wore at their wedding. Something old, something new, something borrowed and it was a blue dress. Luke kissing his Bride said " Yeah, Mrs Stoddard, they don't call me Lucky for nothing."

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