

CHAPTER 2

Trupenny sits in his parlor by a front window with a view of the street. He has been growing anxious; two days have passed since he sought Sheriff Martin at the city jail and thus far no one has been by to let him know that the Sheriff got the message of his ailment.

He opens the bible on his lap and leafs through the holy book, stopping here and there to examine a passage or other. He puts the book down and resting his hand on a framed photo on the nearby table. He lets out a long sigh.

“Julie,” he whispers to the image in the frame, “Why’d ya go and leave me? We were s’possed ta go t’gether.”

Hearing hoof-beats, he quickly puts down the photo, rises quickly and limps to the front door. Taking two steps out on the porch, he spots Wes Liggett, Jeffrey Liggett, the town barber’s teenage teen-age son, approaching on horseback. He is able to get there in time to intercept him before he passes the house.

“Hey Wes,” he calls out. “You goin’ into town?”

At the sound of Trupenny’s voice, Wes reins up and steers his roan toward the house.

“Yeah. Somethin’ I can do for ya, Sheriff?” asks Wes.

“Are ya gonna be comin’ back this way anytime soon?” asks Trupenny. “Ain’t the Sheriff anymore,” he adds.

“You’re always Sheriff ta me, Sheriff—and yeah, just droppin’ off lunch to my Pa and then goin’ home.”

“Great. Would ya mind stoppin’ off at the jail and see if Sheriff Martin’s there and if he is, see if he was told about my medical condition and that I wont be in for a while. Then stop on the way back ta let me know?”

“What medical condition is that, Sheriff?”

“Oh—I got the gout in my foot, nothin’ serious, just hurts like hell, makes it tough ta ride and get around.”

“Be glad ta do it, Sheriff—should be back this way in less than an hour,” says Wes, as he urges his mount toward town.

Wes dismounts in front of the jail and twirls the reins of his horse around the hitching post. Upon entering he finds the desk in the front room is unoccupied.

“Anybody here?” he calls out.

“Yeah, what is it?” a voice responds from the back room, where the cells are located.

Walking toward the sound of the voice, Wes notes that the response is coming from one of the three cells behind the office that makes up the town jail.

Laying prone on the jail bunk is Neville Scotcher, reading a newspaper and smoking a stogie.

“What can I do for ya, kid?” he asks, barely taking his eyes from the paper.

“Sheriff around?” asks Wes.

“What's it about?”

“I need ta give'im a message from Sheriff Trupenny.”

Scotcher sits up but doesn't immediately answer as he looks Wes up and down.

“Ya mean deputy Trupenny, don'tcha?”

“No,” says Wes. “I know what I mean.”

“You're a smart-ass little fucker, aintcha?” says Scotcher rising off the bunk and moving toward Wes.

Wes stands his ground as Scotcher stands nose to nose with him, actually nose to Adams apple, Wes being a half foot taller than Scotcher.

“You're lucky I don't toss your ass into one of these cells and throw away the key, you little prick,” sputters an angry Scotcher, looking up into Wes's face.

“What for? I didn't do anything. Anyway Sheriff Trupenny wanted to know if Sheriff Martin got the message about him not feelin' well?” says Wes.

“Just get the fuck outta here” says Scotcher leading Wes to the door.

“Well, did he?” persists Wes.

“Just get on your fuckin' nag and get outta here before I put a coupla holes in your ass.”

Wes deliberately takes his time as he unties and mounts his horse and slowly moves away.

“And your Pa gives shitty haircuts,” Scotcher shouts after him.

The cowbell over the front door, clangs as Wes enters his Pa's barbershop.

“Hey, Wes,” greets his father who is absorbed in shaving a customer laying prone in the barber-chair.

“Put the lunch on the table in back, wouldja?”

Wes deposits his father's lunch, which consists of leftover beef stew and stale cornbread from the pre-

vious evening's dinner on the table in the back room. He returns to the front of the store and stands quietly in the doorway as his father continues shaving his customer. Looking up, Jeffrey sees his son still standing in the doorway.

Several quiet seconds pass before the silence becomes so loud it cannot be ignored.

"What's up, son, need somethin'?" asks Jeffrey as he stops, razor in hand.

With a motion of the head Wes indicates the man getting shaved.

"You worried about ole Charlie here? Charlie Norton's an old friend, you can talk in front of him, Wes. So, got a problem?"

Wes commences to tell his father of his run-in with Scotcher.

"Ya gotta understand where Scotcher's comin' from, he got a burr up his behind when it comes to former Sheriff Trupenny—Ya see Son, a few years ago when Trupenny was still Sheriff, Scotcher was turned down by Trupenny for the same job he now holds under Sheriff Martin. So ya see, there's no love lost between them."

"So where's Sheriff Martin, Pa? Sheriff Trupenny asked me to get a massage to him, that he wouldn't be comin' in for a coupla days, but no one knows or'll say where he's at."

"I know where he is. Matter of fact they was in the shop here, when the Sheriff and a deputy were talkin' about it. Fact is, they shoulda been back by now."

"So where is he, Pa?"

"They was sayin' that Malcolm Taylor who has the spread out by the Smokey Bluff came gallopin' hard into town the other day, his horse in a lather. Seems the Carters who own the parcel adjacent to Taylor was under siege by a group of outlaw injuns."

"Ain't the Carters the black family?"

"The same—anyways the Sheriff rounded up a posse and took out for their place. Ain't seen them since."

"How long ago was that?"

"Two, three days."

"Nobody gone ta see where they're at?"

"Not that I know."

"Don't ya think they should?"

"Don't know, not my job—Whatta *you* think, Charlie?" Jeffrey asks the man in the chair.

"About what?" asks Charlie.

"Nothin," says Jeffrey.