

Bender's Creek

By John D. Vollmer

Part One

Sam paid for his goods and then asked the shopkeeper if he knew of anybody from Iowa around here. He thought for a moment and said "Well, there's old Silas, has a farm up northeast of town. Tough as a bullet but getting on in years." Pause. "And there was a younger one, not as tall as you, skinny, wears a gray shirt and a yellow vest, under an old coat. Which is unusual for these parts. The vest, not the coat." "Know where I could find him?" "I'd say saloon is your best bet." "There are five of them." Grinning, he said, "Then I'd say you got your work cut out for you."

It was small even by Cheyenne standards, the glass panels in the swinging double door cut by someone who didn't know what he was doing. At the bar Sam asked for a beer, dropped two small coins. and the bartender knew by the look on his face there was no point in the usual banter. Sam gulped his beer and when it was almost done, took the time to look around. A small man sat at a small table and when a fancy-dressed man stopped there and said something about a game of cards, the small man said sharply, "No thanks," then more softly, "No, thanks," Sam noticed him. He thought for a minute, then went over. "Sorry, friend, but don't I know you?" Earl looked up, puzzled and resentful, then he stood up and said, "By God! Sam! Is that you Sam?" "It sure is! And you're... Earl! Earl Campbell!" "Yes, that's it! How are you Earl?" "Sam Hawthorne! A damn sight better now! Sit down Sam. What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

Sam hoisted his beer at the bartender, who had noticed this, and brought over another beer and set it down in front of Earl.

They had hardly known one another but both were from Ames, Iowa. Sam's father was a farmer and Earl's father owned a small general store. But Earl's daughter Karen and Sam's son George were sent to play in the town park by their mothers and had become good friends.

"I wasn't actually looking for you. Trying to find Tim Strand. You remember him? Preacher's son. Well, he owes me money so I've been asking everywhere I go."

"I can help you there," said Earl. "Heard about him when I was in Colorado. Killed in a knife fight was how I heard it. Over a woman. Other fellow died a few days later. My, Sam, you look wonderful! Wish I could say the same."

"You don't look like you've had a good time of it," said Sam. Earl: "No, and that's for sure. There was no future in Ames, my dad's store, you remember that?, was being run by my step-mother and her older son, Skip. No place for me there so I followed the hundreds..." "Thousands," interrupted Sam, "yeah. Out looking for gold. I was dumb enough to think I could make my way out here." "Didn't turn out that way?" said Earl. Sam said, "Not even close. Came up against Nevada. Nothing but desert and no way around. Unless you had the money for a guide, and even then..." "I know," said Earl. "All liars and cutthroats. I know. I tried Utah, same story. Just the smell of it was wrong."

"But Sam, I'm down to my last" he felt in his pocket, "87 cents. Robbed in Colorado, took my horse, tho I had enough hidden to buy me a nag that ain't worth much. Tried everything to make enough to get me back, cowboyin', odd jobs, nothing paid enough and seems to me I just ain't mean enough for this country. Almost killed a man trying to grab my pistol while I was asleep but I just couldn't do it. It was him and two others like him who waylaid me out of town and took my horse, tho I had my gun out and that was all they'd chance. No, Sam, I just don't belong out here."

"Well, I've got some money tucked away," said Sam. "My dad felt bad. The farm would go to my two older brothers so he let me sell the new colt, bred to fine stock. Told me to keep half but as I was just

about to saddle up to go, he slipped me the other half. Dearly love my dad. But had to go.

“But Earl, here’s the thing. I’ve got an idea. Almost all the West is plated out and nothing but scum, and the few that hit it big, are gone. But not everywhere. Not everywhere, Earl.”

“Yes,” said Earl “and for good reason. The rest is Indian country.”

“Yes,” said Sam. “But I had the fortune to link up with an Indian squaw, up near Casper.”

“You mean a whore? On her own?” said Earl.

“Yes, but a really fine woman, Earl. Nobody would have anything to do with her but I found an abandoned shack out of town and we lived there for pretty near six months. I paid her well, she wanted to find some way to get back to her people. So I learned a fair bit of her language, which doesn’t go for much, there’s hundreds of Indian tongues, but she taught me what is pretty much a universal sign language. We got along fine.”

“So where is she now?”

“Died. Fever.”

“All right, so what are you thinking?”

“Western Montana, out close to the Rockies, but in the foothills. No one’s, well, pretty much no one, has tried that yet.”

“Yep. Pretty much and the few that did try have their scalps tied to lodge posts.”

After a long pause and another round of beers, Sam finally spoke.

“Earl, let’s get out of here. I wanna talk.”

At 5’10 Sam towered over most men. Having grown up on a farm he’d been subjected to fewer childhood diseases. Earl was about 3 inches shorter, but still a bit taller than most. They walked to the stable where their horses were and Sam gave the boy a dime for keeping an eye on them. Sam eyed Earl’s horse and saddle and saw what he meant. Earl avoided Sam’s eye as he saddled up and they rode out of town and made camp under some cottonwoods near a small stream. They made a fire and put on the pot for coffee. It was almost dusk and they unsaddled the horses and leaned up against them and sipped coffee. Sam took out some jerky and they made do with that. After a time, Sam seemed to have made up his mind and began to talk.

“Lateyah, that was her name, told me what tribes I could deal with, mostly Flathead, Chippewa, and Assiniboiné, not many others. She was Salish. They would be glad to take bags of beads, the women wanted to do beadwork like the tribes to the south, and what the women wanted, the men would get.”

“They’d help us out?”

“No, but they’d leave us alone. The ones to avoid are the Crow and the Blackfeet. The Blackfeet are just murderous thugs, all the other tribes hate them. The Crow had been friendly once but had had enough bad dealings with whites that they’d kill any they came across.”

“And how do you tell the difference?”

“Different clothes. If you see Crow or Blackfeet, she said, just turn and ride as fast as you can, firing behind you. So, anyway. In the foothills she said there were some small streams, coming down from the hills, not many. It’s dry country. But I think it’s worth a try. She thought there was still gold there. I think I need someone I can trust, can’t keep my eyes open all day and all night. Tho late night isn’t much of a problem. However, and here’s the good part, the streams and hills we’re looking for are in Salish territory. And for this work, two is better than one.”

“So. Me? Have to think about it. But I’m stuck, and I know it.”

“Well, the alternative,” said Sam, “is to turn tail and go home. I’ve got enough for both of us for supplies and I’d be willing to do that. But I don’t much like the idea of being on my own.”

Earl settled back and gave it thought. For a long time.

“You’ve got enough to stake us with gear and all?”

“I do.”

“Then I’m in. There’s nothing left for me back there. The girl I wanted got the fever and died and I don’t think I could have another. No. OK. I say let’s do ‘er.”

And that was that. They’d had enough with talk. Time to try their luck, toss in their hats, and give what came a try.

They headed north the next day and stopped at a town with scattered farmland all around. There was a feed store, a general store, two bars (of course), a stable and blacksmith, and little else. Sam bargained for an exchange of Earl’s horse and they stocked up.

Both had an extra pair of jeans and a shirt in their saddlebags, as well as spoons, small knives, pans for cooking and panning, and ammo. In addition, Sam had rope, binoculars, and bags of beads. Ever practical, Earl had a compass, a hoof knife, a sewing kit, hooks and line, flint and steel, pencil and paper, and scissors. Both had Navy colts and rifles, boot knives, a blanket roll behind the saddle, and Sam had a light roll of buckskin in front of his saddle for a tent. Both had straps fore and aft of the saddles for canteens, hatchets, and folding spades. Both had rucksacks with cornmeal, beans, sorghum, and coffee and folded over those a long but light raincoat. They moved north again, camped for the night. They unshipped their supplies and Sam sniggered at the fishing line and sewing kit but made surprised and appreciative remarks about the rest. But he asked what the scissors were for. “I don’t mind roughing it on the open plain,” he said. “But I’m damned if I’ll have a beard that makes me look like a mountain man.” “Ah,” said Sam, “good idea.” Earl did indeed know the practical side of small matters.

The morning meal was cornmeal with some of the previous morning’s pancake, which Earl always kept from the previous morning, to give it a rise, plus the life-giving sorghum sweetener. At noon they had red beans that Sam had kept in water in a sack all day. In the evening they had roasted rabbit, only occasionally missing one during the day’s ride. They were everywhere. Sam was the best shot at first but Earl was a quick learner. Every morning Sam cursed himself for having forgotten bacon. Earl tried to capture fat from the roasted rabbit, but there simply wasn’t any. The morning coffee was welcome, and with the evening rabbit, the tepid leftover coffee beans from the morning never kept them up.

They rode for six days and often Sam would pull out his binoculars and scan the horizon for trouble. On the third day they saw a cut-down grassland with many black buffalo chips. They skirted wide of this and, sure enough, saw Indians coming toward them from the west at a gallop. Sam yelled “Blackfeet,” turned his horse and rode like hell. Earl followed and, fortunately, their horses were fresher. They had ridden mostly at a walk and sometimes walked the horses. This proved wise.

On the seventh day they came upon low mountains and dry plains. Ahead they saw Indians and stopped. Sam took out his binoculars, stood up in his saddle and relaxed. “Salish,” he said. When they grew near, Sam kicked out his left stirrup, curved his right leg over the horse’s neck, and slid to the ground. Earl did his best to imitate. They held their hands up high and when the Salish grew near, the leader held up an arm to those following and they dismounted. They took a minute to study one another and Sam yelled out what sounded like a greeting. The leader, clearly relieved, yelled back and they drew near for a talk. A young Indian came forward and took the reins of their horses and led them off to the side. Earl snarled “Sam!” but Sam said, “It’s all right. They’re showing that they trust us.” And, sure enough, the boy took

their horses to join the others that other boys led to the side.

They squatted facing one another and a boy brought a blanket for the “chief” to sit on. Earl heard the guttural and sometimes lyrical exchanges. Sometimes Sam would make hand gestures, unsure of a meaning, and this went on for quite some time. Finally, Sam stood up, went to his saddle bags, and brought back a deer-hide bag and offered it to the chief. He grinned broadly and made sure that Sam understood that, not only would they not be molested, but he was free to go anywhere they wanted. They rode on, tremendously relieved and grateful, and made for the ever-rising mountains to the northwest. When they made camp that night Sam told Earl what they had said.

“They are no longer at war with the Crow, who are consolidating the tribes to fight the whites. He thought we were safe. I told him what we were after and he seemed amused. They thought of gold as strictly ornamental. He had about a hundred dollars worth of gold in his necklace. He agreed that our best chance was in the few streams that came down from the mountains, and in the spring it was not uncommon for ‘flash floods,’ I had trouble with that word, and they almost never resulted in fixed streams. He told me how to read the signs at the edges of the foothills. Those floods were over with now. He wished us well and altogether seemed like a really decent, honorable man.”

They had started out in the early spring of 1872 and now it was time to get down to work.

Starting from the south, they rode along the line at the base of the foothills, the smallest gullies starting at the south, with fans of jumbled scree at the bottom. They found wash after wash of huge dry gullies.

Near the end of their trek north, they saw signs of a spring—plant life almost in abundance and not just the dead-looking brush that dominated everywhere else. In fact, to feed the horses they often had to traverse the desert floor to the meager grasslands to the east. But what they saw now was something new.

They found the stream itself, which seemed to dive into the ground near the entrance, and found a beautiful, wide at first, then narrowing, stream-fed meadow, that grew from a few feet wide to yards wide, with abundant grass along its banks, perfect for the horses. They felt they had been blessed. There were a few side-gullies in the cliffs that fed trickles of water to the stream. About a mile in, and well sheltered from prying eyes, they found a curve in the stream that made for a nice, small, perfect campsite. It took no time at all to cut pegs from the few stunted trees and set up the tent and a ring of rocks for their fire. Up the slopes there were plenty of dead tree limbs. It was idyllic. Idly, Sam looked down the gully and saw, perfectly framed, a small hill or mountain in the distance. It bothered him somehow, then he dismissed it, aglow with their new fortune. Or would-be fortune.

A few days after setting up camp, a couple of Salish Indian boys showed up with a gift of venison and an invitation for Sam to visit their village. They’d hit the jackpot, if only they could now find gold, which seemed like a far-off dream.

They set to work with the pans, upstream and downstream. Soon their imagined soft work turned into a hell of wet pants (changed every evening with the wet ones set up near the fire), aching arms, cold, and no gold at all. There were pebbles a foot thick in the middle of the stream, but no amount of panning yielded anything but minnows and a kind of slime grass, which made the work all the harder. Their hands became stiff and raw, cracked, from the ice-cold stream. But one evening, after sitting lost in thought, Earl set to work. He sliced some buckskin from the edges of the tent and went to work with scissors and his sewing kit. Sam looked on, bemused at first, even snorting, and then with growing wonder. At last Earl held up a buckskin mitten and Sam whooped and danced. “I’m sorry I ever said it, Earl! You’re a wonder and them trinkets of yours are a gift before the eyes of God!” Earl beamed, then set back to work making mittens for both of them.

After ten days of slogging hard work, Earl went to the bank to rest and think. It was near sunset and as the light faded the walls of their mini canyon glowed orange, then red, then purple. The water of the

stream perfectly captured the change and he thought this was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. Looking at the stream, he saw how the black sand near the bank set up a brilliant contrast to the colors. He bent over to wash it back and forth and, My God!, he saw, staring up at him, tiny flecks ... of gold!

He couldn't believe his eyes. He stood up, saw Sam upstream, and shouted his name. "Sam! Sam, come here! We've been doing it all wrong! Look! Look!"

Sam trudged over, looked down, looked closer, then the both of them went to work with their pans in a hungry flurry. They had been working the middle of the stream, but it was here, near the banks, that they finally hit it. In twenty minutes of work, they'd set aside a dollar's size circle of gold dust and tiny nuggets on a piece of buckskin. It was dark when they finally stopped and sat on the bank, not saying anything. They got up, Earl pocketed the precious find, and they went back to camp. Sam fed the tiny fire, put on the coffee, and then they just stared at each other. Finally, they broke out into a hoedown dance, linking each other's elbows, flying around, then stomping and shuffling back and forth at one another and whooping their lungs out. They'd done it! They'd actually done it! They were rich at last, filthy rich!

They had started out in the late spring and they had a good three months ahead of them to work the stream. Each night they brought back their bags of gold, not bothering to wash the dirt out, dumped it all in a pile, and split it 50-50. From time to time, Sam rode out to the Salish village with bags of beads and came back with deer meat. The days and weeks passed by in a haze of contentment, their muscles long since hard and taut. The only down side was Sam's empty pipe, kept lightly between his teeth as they talked quietly in the soft twilight. Rain was rare.

Earl was writing a letter when Sam said, "We ought to do something about this gold."

Earl looked up and asked, "What do you mean?" "Well, Earl, we're the best of friends but, and I hate to say it, that much gold would tempt Saint Peter."

Earl thought for a while and then said, "What would you suggest? I can see you've been thinking about it."

"I have," said Sam. "Look, here's what I think we should do. Split it in half and each buries his. I'll go upstream, you go down. Find a good spot to bury it, making sure to spot landmarks so we can find it again when we're ready to go. How's that sound?"

"That sounds perfect," said Earl. "I'd hate to think what you've been thinking but it's just sound reasoning. Let's do that."

"And what's that letter you're writing?" asked Sam.

"Well, it's to my niece, back in Ames. None of my family, if you want to call it that, mean anything to me. But I always liked Karen and your nephew and her almost look like they're thinking marriage. Too early, I know, but I can see it in the way they talk to each other.

"So, I'm writing her to expect us in the fall. But if we don't show up, I'm telling her how to get to here and what we're up to. Don't know that there's anything they could do about it, just want someone to know if we don't make it."

"Well Earl, that's damn good of you and a damned good thought. But how in hell do you propose to mail it?"

"You said that chief don-ketcha-ma-pony, or whatever his name is, said that there was a new small settlement just south of the mountains. Nobody bothers them but they're scraping a living from the last of the good land. It's a two-day ride but I'll take it to them with some gold and ask them to send it along." He was enclosing five small nuggets, enough to pay for each stage, with a bit left over for thanks.

He didn't want to use Sam's last dollar.

"Now that's not a bad idea. Mail is always sacred, so it'll probably get thru."

As good as his word, Earl rode off the next morning and wasn't back until four days later. Sam had scrupulously kept his pannings split in two. He'd grown increasingly fond of Earl and truly felt he had found his brother.

The weeks went by and September was in the air. By now the gold seemed to amount to almost fifty pounds, each, safely tucked away.

The meanest-looking one peered thru his telescope, then stood up and said "Tonight. Get ready."

At dusk they made for the southern-most hill above the creek, staked their horses and climbed up. Mean-eye used his spyglass to survey the creek opposite. In the dark they made their way as quietly as they could up to the top of the draw.

Before dawn, they started their way down. From time to time, pebbles were set loose and they froze—but there was no sound from the tent. They settled in to wait for dawn, no rifles, just handguns. Waiting.

Sam came out first just after dawn, stretching and yawning, making his way to the embers of the fire to make coffee. Earl came out, looked all around. He felt uneasy. As they squatted on their heels, still half-dressed, the four men came out on the run, guns at the ready. Sam's last thought was that damned hill he'd ignored. He shouldn't have. He barely had his gun out of the holster before bullets smashed into the grass around him. Then two hit him in the chest and another glanced off the side of his skull, breaking it wide open.

Earl's last thought was "The Letter" (the gold) and he managed to get off four shots at the nearest man. Two went wide but one hit the upper chest and the other his abdomen. That was all.

Part Two

"Leave him be, he's gut-shot, won't last long." The man called Snake wore a confederate cap and his "rank" was clearly that of a leader. Everyone wore high boots against rattlesnakes in the bushes; he was called Snake because of his habit of grabbing one by the tail end, twirling it overhead, then grabbing it up near the neck, using his now free hand to clamp on the head, and biting the head off. He was obviously very pleased by the reactions of others.

"Clean this place out of anything that looks useful. And we know gold is here."

The others set to work.

He got his nickname while serving in the rebel army in Texas, where there was virtually no fighting. In between dispatching and eating rattlesnakes, he and a couple of other "soldiers" found and raided outlying ranches, killing everyone and taking whatever was portable and valuable.

They searched the camp for hours, finding only a rather small amount of gold in two buckskin pouches. Snake was furious. At last, they rode off, now with three extra horses, which they switched often. Simply for the pleasure of riding them to death, so they could steal more, killing the owners in the process. They avoided big towns.

It was late March and Karen and George sat in a small shack as she read the letter yet again. The shop belonged to her father, the town blacksmith. Karen's mother had died in childbirth and Paul, her father, had to bring in a nurse to take care of her. This woman he eventually married but she had a daughter of her own and constantly belittled and abused Karen until Paul finally slapped her, over and over again. He doted on Karen and the step-mother got the message. Earl was Paul's brother and Karen loved Earl for his quiet ways and thoughtful caring for her, a surrogate father. George, like his uncle Sam, lived on a farm near town and his father was prosperous enough to give George plenty of opportunity to half-live in town, staying often with an aunt, Sam's sister. After reading the letter yet again, Karen was thinking, intense. Fall had come and gone and no sign of either Earl or Sam. They knew what that meant. The West was truly lawless and a large amount of gold would be a magnet for killers and thieves.

"George, this letter is not just a map, it's two maps. One for finding the place in western Montana, but the other for finding the gold. At least, his gold." "OK, I get that. But wouldn't the robbers or killers have gotten the gold?" "No." She lifted up the last page. "Because they didn't have the map." "I don't understand. Why does he talk about just where his gold was?"

"I think I understand that. They didn't want to be tempted into taking all the gold. Which means there must've been a lot of gold. Otherwise, why bother?" "OK. I get that. They were great pals by then, having known one another back here. But if it was a lot of gold they weren't sure they could even trust one another."

"Exactly. George..." she paused for a moment. "George, he sent this to us because in case he didn't make it, robbed or whatever, he wanted us to have it." "Karen! You can't be thinking...you can't..." "Why not George. He wanted us, probably both, wanted us to have it." George stood, "You can't be serious! We're just kids! They don't call it the Wild West for nothing! We wouldn't stand a chance in hell!"

Karen was calm. "I've given this a lot of thought. We aren't 'just kids,' not out West. I'm 18 and you're 19. We could pass for adults out there, with the right clothes and the right attitude. The train now goes from St. Louis to Wyoming. It would be a lot easier these days." "But what about what's next? Do we just walk to Montana? Do we..." "No. It would take money. But I know the combination to dad's safe. He has a lot of money, saved up over the years..." "You can't just rob your own dad! Karen, what are you thinking..." "Dad loves me, George. And I'd leave him an IOU note. I know him. He'd just put it aside and quietly wish me well. I'd either pay him back or never return. He wouldn't know why but he'd...I dunno,...trust me to know what I'm about."

George sat back down to think. After a long pause he said, "But Karen. We'll get ourselves killed. I'm damn sure of that." Karen said, "George, whether you come along or not, I'm going. I have to. For Earl. And I bet you anything that there's a whole lot of gold out there. I want it."

Karen had been the town tomboy and the other boys had quickly learned not to cross her. She was forceful, determined, and much tougher than any other kid in town. A man, a stranger, had once tried to fondle her and they found him the next day, seriously injured. He didn't dare say who'd done it. George thought about that. But was he going to risk his life? On the other hand, how many thousands had gone West to seek their fortune? And all but a few failed. And they had the map.

Now there was no way back. George had stolen one of his father's horses and a saddle. George rode in front, with Karen sitting behind. When they got to St. Louis, he sold the horse and saddle and George sent the money back. They got on the train and there was no looking back.

They got off the train at Cheyenne, just where Sam and Earl had set off. Karen let George buy the horses and saddles; he knew a lot more about horses. Hers wasn't much more than a pony. That took more than half their money. But Karen bought the supplies, having given that a lot of thought on the train. They

got quizzical looks but Karen brushed aside questions deftly. It was none of their business and most people knew better than to pry. She changed from her skirt into jeans; they both now had Western hats. Soon they were off.

They gave a wide berth to towns and farms and ranches and that ate up a lot of time. But that wasn't the main problem. After one day they were saddle-sore and after two they were almost crippled. They walked the horses a lot but soon they were making good time. They slept out on the open prairie, as countless others had done before. Karen stopped from time to time to scan the horizon with her binoculars.

They made it in eight days. The foothills of the Rockies rose up in front of them and they rode up as close as they could get. Karen took out the letter and scanned gullies and tumbled scree. The right canyon lay far ahead and they skirted the small mountain's edge. They found it a little after noon, the bizarre growth of plants fairly screamed "Here I Am" and they paused to look up at the stream. George took the lead and they rode up. Within an hour they found the campground of their uncles. And bones.

Bones everywhere, and clothes, scattered on both sides of the creek, even in the creek and partway up the slope. A huge jumble, and had they but known it, too many bones for two. They quickly abandoned the grisly scene and went looking for the hidden treasure.

Which wasn't as easy as they'd thought it would be. One person's "obvious" landmarks was another person's fuzzy mental image. They knew the rough area, but then fell to arguing what the "instructions" meant. Finally, Karen stood in one spot and slowly scanned the area, moving this way and that. Then she stuck her folding spade in the ground and announced, "George, dig here." They fell to it and discovered nothing until George's shovel finally hit something both hard and soft. On their hands and knees, they dug with their hands. Until they had uncovered four mid-sized buckskin sacks. They hauled them out and opened the first one. Gold. Unmistakable gold. They grinned at one another. It was quite literally a gold mine. However, mixed in with the gold was quite a bit of dirt. Sam and Earl had no way to sluice it clean and far too much trouble to pan it clean. Karen and George had no way to wash it clean either. As a result, the bags were quite a bit bulkier. "How much do you think they weigh?" asked Karen. "I'd say..." George hefted one up and down, "I'd say about 50 pounds each." "My god," said Karen, "over 100 pounds! Even with the dirt, which is a lot lighter...but gold! George, we're rich!"

George sat back. After a moment he said "But." Long pause. "But. Karen. How do we haul around something that heavy, and bulky, kinda obvious, and worse still, how do we spend it or convert it? That would set up red flags all over the place. And we ain't in Iowa anymore." "Yes," said Karen. "Good point. But let me think about it overnight. Something always occurs to me. I'll figure it out, George. Trust me."

When George woke up the next morning Karen was already out, studying the bones, scavenged by animals. George joined her but they soon realized there was nothing to be gained by looking at bones. However, there were also a lot of clothes and these they investigated, trying to determine which belonged to who. Then George picked up a belt. Looking around he saw another. And then a third! "Karen! Look at this! There are three belts, not two!" She came over and looked and then looked around more at the clothes. "Too many clothes for two men...there was a third man here." "Yes," said George. "And you can count on the third one being one of the killers." He looked inside the belts. There were the initials E.C. there. "Earl Campbell" said George. "And look, this one is S. Hawthorne, spelled out. Sam. Our uncles. Oh, god, this is so sad." I can't make out the third one, it's really rough." "Let me see. Well, I think that's an R but ..." "Wait," said George. He went back to the tent and came back with paper and a pencil. He took the belt, laid the paper on it, and rubbed the pencil back and forth. "Yes, that's it," said Karen. "Much clearer now. R something..." "I think that's an L," said George. "And the next one is an A ... R Landers!" said Karen. "Oh my god," said George. "One of the killers was R Landers. Robert? Richard?" Karen sat down in a slump.

For both of them this sudden personalization changed their mood entirely. Karen's face took on a look of grim determination that at first shocked George, then frightened him. Neither of them spoke, until, they found the other.

"Oh, George," she said. "Our uncles and a man who killed them. One of the men. There had to be more. Oh, George." "We've got a name. Or at least part of one."

"Yes. But all of a sudden, this changes things." "What do you mean?" "We've got ... a man. A killer and a thief." "Well, so?" "Let me think," said Karen. "This is something completely different."

They had dinner and later that evening, their fire blazing brightly and the lantern on in the tent when, finally, Karen broke the silence that hung heavily on them.

"He killed Earl. George, he killed Earl and Sam too. ... I'm going to find his pals who were part of it and kill them. He had to belong to a gang. Had to be." "Karen," said George quietly, but then with a rising voice. "I'd like nothing better. But it's a huge country! We've only got part of a name! Kill them?! They're killers! And we're lugging around all that gold! Are you insane?" "Well, all right. You're right. But I have to try. OK, it's too big ... it's. OK, but just give me a week, OK? If I don't find them in a week, fine. But I'll bet they're well known. And we can stash the gold. Just..." she gave up.

George thought for a long time and then said, "OK. A week. I want the killers too. OK. We'll try it for a week. But stashing that much gold is no joke. And have you even thought about how we'd get it out of here? With two huge bundles tied to the pommels? That's no good." Karen sat back and thought. "Let me sleep on it," she said. "I'll think of something in the morning."

George knew better than to underestimate Karen. There was that guy she'd half beaten to death. And others who had tried to molest her. Fine. But this was a whole 'nuther thing. Well, giving her a week, what was the harm? It was ridiculous but it was only a week and then they'd head back home.

That night she reached out to him. Then took his arm. Then slipped off her jeans. They made love, intertwined, personified in the tie that binds the world together.

They slept well.

In the morning, over their cup of coffee, she said, "A travois."

"A what? What's a travois?" "You take two long, strong poles and attach them to the stirrup mounts. They drag along behind the horse, a good way behind. Then you string a sling between the two poles and the horse drags them along."

"OK, and then you put the bags on the sling and cover them. What, to make it look like a body?" "No. Then sling it sideways and it just looks like you're carrying supplies and such. 'Cause you don't have a mule."

"Ah. Get it. And we don't have a mule. That could work. How do you know about this?" "Saw a picture in a book." "And there are things here we need to take along. OK. Good thinking. Plus two rifles and three guns."

"Don't think we need the rifles. But the two pistols and ammo." "They need cleaning but I can do that. There's a kit." "OK, so let's get to work." "Wait. What about Indians?" "We saw none coming in. I think they're out east of here, fighting the US Army." "I'll get started on the poles."

It took them two days to get back to the first settlement, with two changes of poles that weren't strong enough, and adjustments to the whole thing. The new settlement was small but they decided to stop there anyway, in case the gang was using it for cover.

"Now the two weeks start," said Karen. "One week. What's your plan?" "You'll see."

Their travois didn't even excite a second glance. They stopped at the general store, bought a few things, then sat out front. One old geezer asked them what they were doing and Karen said, "Waiting for our parents. They'll be along shortly."

Karen studied the people walking the dusty street, then finally said, "There she is." "There who is?" asked George.

"See that old lady there, with the bundle? Heading home I bet." "So?" "Old ladies know everything, know all the gossip. We follow her."

They followed at a distance and when the old woman mounted the steps on creaky legs, they made their approach.

"Good evening, ma'am" said Karen. "We're sorry to bother you, but we're looking for our parents." "Bother? No bother at all. C'mon in and rest yourselves!"

George had to admit. She knew what she was doing. That was easy enough, but when asked about someone called R. Landers, a man who knew their father, they drew a blank.

The next town was no better, nor the next. Two days left. As always, they put the bags and travois in a ditch and covered them up with scrub bushes and tumbleweed.

Then they hit the next town, much bigger, Cody. They followed the usual routine. This time the old lady snorted.

"Your kin know that sonofabitch? Well, if that don't beat all."

The jackpot.

"Not really a friend," said Karen. "We just heard he might know where our folks are. You know him?" "I damn sure don't! And you best stay away from him. He's called Bibby, dunno why. And he hangs out with that nasty bunch. Haven't seen him for quite some time."

George got up and said "Can I fix you something to eat?" "Well, that's quite fine of you son. Kitchen's back there."

George went back, found shaved oats, and began making oatmeal. He knew it was better to leave Karen alone with the old gossip.

The old lady rambled on about everything except what Karen wanted to know. But she just nodded and made short remarks. George finally appeared with a big bowl of oatmeal, molasses, and three glasses of milk. He spread things out on a table and Karen helped the old woman up and sat down at the table.

"So who did this Bibby hang out with? You said 'nasty gang.'" "Durn right. Mean as snakes." She cackled. "Get it? Snakes! The big one is called Snake." "Ah. What does he look like?" "Hmm. Dresses better than he should do. Big scar on his right cheek." "And the others?" "Just the one now. T'other disappeared. Nobody misses him."

"How's this other one look?" "Ginger hair. Low-life scum and treats Snake like a boss. They call him Dukey, tho there ain't nothing of a duke about him."

They had what they needed. They let the old woman talk until she looked like she was nodding off and with thanks and apologies quietly left. Karen and George knew where to look for that kind.

There were four saloons in town and Karen waited on a chair on the sidewalk, George's pistol in her lap, while George went into each. He stopped at the door, looking left and right as if he were looking for someone, which he was, and then walked to the back and back out to the front again. When he was

finished, he found Karen and took her to another sidewalk chair.

“They’re in that one, Snake and Dukey. Drinking and playing cards with two others.” “OK. Let’s get something to eat and then we’ll wait.”

They found a beanery and had one of their worst meals ever. They didn’t mind.

Back at the sidewalk George said “What are you going to do?” “Just wait. I’m taking my time, thinking.”

They watched the door of the saloon, no one on the street; it was Sunday.

Well after dark they saw the drunks leaving the saloon until they spotted Dukey, staggering down the street, heading for the livery stables.

Lights went out in the saloon as other lights came on upstairs.

“OK,” said Karen. “Snake must have a room. Let’s go around the side and see if we can find him.”

George looked up at the windows and as each light went down, he climbed up a ladder he’d found and looked in. There was just enough from the dimmed lamp to see. Finally, he climbed down again and jerked his thumb up. “That one,” he said. They waited several minutes and then Karen pointed to him to climb up and she followed.

The window was locked and George took out his small knife and worked at it until it opened. He stared inside at the man lying mostly on the bed, legs half off the mattress. He lifted the window, still staring, but the man didn’t move. He carefully stepped inside and Karen followed. “What are you going to do?” whispered George. “Just give me your knife, the big one,” answered Karen. “No! You can’t...” “Just give it to me!” Karen hissed. She took the knife, felt its very sharp edge, and went around the bed.

George just stared as she slowly climbed onto the bed behind the man, who only snored on. When she was close to him, she hooked her right leg over his right arm, then quickly grabbed his hair, pulled back, and slid the knife across his neck. He tried to jerk up and croaked a yell. It was only a superficial cut. She clamped down hard on his right arm, now hooked into her leg, but he was strong and half sat up, his left hand pawing for her head. Instinctively, George grabbed his ankles and pulled. The man was strong and George jammed his feet into the leg of the bedstead and pulled with all his strength. Karen changed her grip on the knife and drove it hard into the left side of his neck, then pulled it hard, straight across. She was surprised at how easily it cut. Blood spurted from his neck, hitting George in the face, his hair, and his shirt. The man was trembling and jerking all over, then quickly lay still. “Earl,” she said.

George looked into her eyes, the eyes now of a killer, and suddenly he saw a connection he hadn’t felt before. Strength, resolve, yes, but also a keen awareness of the now that transferred itself to him in a deeply unifying way. Somehow it was powerfully serene at the same time.

Karen turned up the lamp and dipped a towel in the wash basin and cleaned up his face and hair as best she could. There was nothing she could do about the shirt but he could change when they got back to the horses.

They climbed down the ladder and began walking toward the stables. George was shaking and miserable. Karen was completely calm and determined.

When they got to the stables they saw Dukey leaned up against the boards of a hay crib, sound asleep and snoring. Karen climbed up over the hay and took out her pistol. From above, she wrapped it in a small blanket and pointed it at his head. George looked at her, aghast. She pulled the trigger but it wouldn’t budge. She unwrapped the blanket, undid the safety pin, rewrapped it, pointed it down at the man’s head and fired. It made a louder sound than she thought it would. His head looked like someone had smashed a pumpkin with a hammer. She climbed back down. “Sam,” she said.

Then came a sound from the higher walkway and a man in his 60s appeared, holding a lantern in his left hand and a gun, resting on the railing, in his right, pointing nowhere. Karen had her gun behind her back but George had his hanging limply from his right hand. He dropped it. The man lifted the lantern high, then back down again, as far as he could reach. Karen took out a small pouch and gestured to throw it up to him. He pushed the gun aside and she tossed it up. He snatched it deftly, opened it, and peered in beside the lantern. He nodded, picked up his gun and turned away. But after a short pause he looked back over the railing and said, "Ain't nobody gonna miss that one. Now get out of here."

Which they did, tossing the saddles onto their horses and led them out. They'd cinch up the saddles outside. The horses made no comment.

They rode back to the ditch where they'd hidden the bags, but this time they took them from the travois and hooked two bags each onto the pommels. They rode all night, at a slow trot, staying to the road. No one followed. The next morning, they found a swale with a few cottonwood trees and a small stream and let the horses feed and water themselves. After a few hours sleep, Karen saddled her horse and told George she'd scout ahead. George finally spoke, "Karen ... Karen ..." was all he could say. She nodded and rode off.

When she came back, she said, "George, there's a tidy little farm up ahead. Let's hide the gold and go there." "What for?" "Have I ever let you down so far?"

They rode to the farmhouse, neat and trim as she'd said. There were three horses in a corral and chickens in the yard. As they approached the farmhouse at a slow walk, the farmer came out, with a rifle. Karen held up her hands in submission and slid off her horse. George did the same, keeping his hands up.

"Who are you and what do you want," said the farmer.

"I'm Karen and this is my brother George. We're hot and tired and I'd like to propose a deal."

Like any farmer out West, he was good at judging people quick and right. He cradled the rifle and said, "Come up to the porch."

They did so, Karen taking a chair and George sitting on the steps.

As she sat down he said, "Names Dan. What's your idea?" "Sir, we've been on the trail for two days and are mighty bad saddle-sore. I'd like to trade my horse there for a buckboard, if you have one." One was clearly visible in the yard.

Dan thought this over and said, "Where are your folks?"

Karen said "We were headed for Oregon in a big wagon, our parents and us." "Oregon," said George.

"We was attacked by Indians." "Indians," said George.

"And they killed our Ma and Pa. We hid under the wagon." "Under a blanket," said George.

"They were taking all our stuff. Then we heard a bugle." "Army bugle," said George.

"And they ran off and left us. But they didn't take the horses."

Dan was clenching his lips so hard to keep from laughing that they were turning white.

"Then what?" said Dan.

"Well, the sound of the bugle drifted off as they chased the Indians." "Lot of Indians," said George.

"So now we need to get back to ... Nebraska. But we need a buckboard for supplies, and like I said we're mighty sore from riding. I'll trade you my horse for a buckboard." "Yes. Yes sir," said George.

Dan had heard plenty of lies in his day but this yarn took the cake. He'd tell this over and over so many times it'd become as thin as a dollar bill.

"Well, I need that board," he said, his thumb at the one in the yard. "But I've got a smaller one out back. Like to see it?"

They jumped up and in unison said "Yessir!"

George looked it over and said it was a good one. Dan knew damn well that a 50-dollar horse was worth a good deal more than a 10-dollar wagon. It was a good deal and he took it. George unhooked Karen's horse, tossed her saddle into the wagon, and did the same with his saddle and hooked up his horse. "We keep the saddles," said George.

"That's fine," said Dan, and as they went back out to the front yard, he looked at Karen and said "Best of luck getting back to ... Nebraska."

His wife had been looking and watching from a window and she came out with eggs and a plucked chicken and coffee, cornmeal, and sorghum. "Here, you take these," she said.

"Very much obliged," said Karen, and with a nod and a wave they left.

They recovered the bags of gold, and when they were well on their way George looked at Karen with admiration. She smiled back. "And now," said George, "the bags just look like more supplies," he said. "Yep," said Karen, proud of herself and not bothering to cover it up.

They drove in relative comfort for five days, stopping to buy supplies on the way. But as there were more and more farms and ranches, Karen looked hard at George as they settled in by the fire that night and said "But this is trouble, George. "Oh," said George, "what trouble? We can just sail on home." "But think about," said Karen, "two kids on a buckboard and now we're heading into towns where there's almost as many thieves and crooks as there were where we came from." "Oh. Yeah. You got any ideas?" "Yes. Well, no, but I will. I want to take the horse into town, must be St. Joe's, and see what I can do." "Karen, you always know what to do. I'll wait here."

She rode into town, a plan forming in her mind. She looked carefully at the restaurants in town. Some were too fancy, some just greasy spoons like the one in Cody. Then she spotted what she was looking for, a comfortable place but not too high-toned. She hitched her horse and walked in, resting up against the piano just to the right of the door and scanned the place.

Her luck held. She spotted him. A man with a hard face but kind eyes, sitting alone and eating a steak. She walked up to his table and asked, "Mind if I sit?"

He looked up and gave her a thorough look. Sat back and said, "Sure."

His name was Jake and he asked if she wanted something to eat. She ordered a salad and coffee. When it came Jake said, "So what's the story?"

She told him some of it, substituting 'father' for uncle, how they'd found him murdered (she brought George into the story) and how he'd left some of his gold behind, not much, under the ashes of his campfire. She said nothing about her killings and finally said, "But Jake. We're just two kids with a buckboard and there are rough kinds everywhere." "So, you want a bodyguard?"

Well, that's about the size of it. We have guns but...I don't know if we could use them. We're kind of in a pickle. But I can pay you, in gold." "How far do you need to go?" "Ames," she said.

Jake pushed away his plate and slid back in his chair, staring at her and thinking. At last he said "I spent five years out West, and I've done some things I'm not proud of, even tho there wasn't any choice. Mostly. So maybe I need to make up for that. Maybe this would do." She was right, this was a good man.

She thanked him with enough gratitude but not too much and they left. When they got to the wagon George was asleep. She woke him up and explained things. She'd come thru again and George was more than impressed.

They spent five days on the road, sleeping out of doors and stopping now and then just to admire the view, the rolling hills and broad valleys with checkerboards of farms and ranches. It was a relaxed journey and George and Karen listened to Jake's tales of the West. They said little about theirs. Jake didn't mind, for he knew there was far more to the story than they said, but the West was like that. What the hell.

When they got to Ames Karen said they would be fine now and offered Jake a small pouch of gold. He refused with a grin and got down and looked at them with great pleasure. She tossed him the sack anyway and he took it, beaming at them and wishing them luck. Suddenly, the grin slacked back a bit. He saw something in Karen's face that he didn't like. He shrugged and got on his horse, waved, and was gone.

The welcome at their respective homes was enormous and they let themselves be fussed over. George came back to Karen's house the next day but was told Karen was being kept in bed, exhausted from the journey. Her mother had seen the yellow in Karen's face. She hid her concern from George and he was refused again the following day.

George knew damn well that something wasn't right and that night he snuck into their house and up to her room. She was asleep. She looked awful. She didn't wake up until George took her hand. She looked at him and a wide smile was returned by George. "You OK," said George. "Sure, I'm fine," said Karen, then she looked down and said "No. George. I'm not, and there's not a thing either one of us can do about it." "Karen. You're not going to..."

"Yes, George. I'm dying. But I don't mind a bit. I'll keep close to my heart what we've done and how I love you." George tried hard but he couldn't make the words come. Finally, she said, "George, you have to go now. Remember me, George. And remember my love. Now go George. I love you." "I...I love you Karen. I'll never forget. I love you."

And he left. The funeral was three days later but he couldn't go into the church, just stood outside. The next day he spent a long time looking at her grave.

Years later, as he lay on his richly adorned recliner in the living room, the lamps dim, an unread book in his lap, George went over it all again, like he had so many times before. What was the good of it? What was the good of all that gold? And as he thought of Karen again, he cried. Like he had so many times before. He cried as if his heart would break.

And then it did.

End.

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