

Spurs stopped abruptly and stabbed a finger at McBain's chest. "You son-of-a-bitch! You killed two o' my friends!"

Without further preamble the fellow swung a vicious right roundhouse at Preston's head. The fist grew immense as it neared his face and Preston felt the wind from it as he pulled back. The misplaced haymaker took the assailant off balance and he did a three-quarter pirouette, spurs tangling as he spun. Compensating agility with luck, he remained upright, growled deep in his chest and swung with his left hand. This shot missed the mark by a greater margin but Preston had had enough. As the clumsy fool waded in for a third attempt, Diamond, rattler quick and in one fluid motion, shifted a half turn, balanced on his left leg, brought his right knee up across his chest, turned his right foot outer edge leading and piston-stroked a brutal rising side kick into Spurs's solar plexus. The heavier man was lifted off his feet and propelled backward through the store's front window. The defenestration demolished panes, frames and tore out the

dainty lace curtains. Spurs crashed to the floor in a grotesque heap amid a shower of glass. Booted feet hung limply out over the sill, one of the vicious pin-wheel rowels spun musically for a few seconds after the last tinkle of broken glass.

The Chinese fellow stared wide-eyed, then, basket in hand, skirted the inert feet, and nodded to Preston as he slipped past murmuring something that sounded like, “Velly good! Velly good!”

McBain stepped into the shop through the new opening, his feet crunching on shards of shattered window pane. He addressed a bespectacled older woman with gray hair pinned up in a tight bun. She was behind a sewing machine, mouth agape, staring in disbelief from Preston to the body on her floor.

“Er... I'm here to make right for the damages I caused to your building last night.”

*Preston  
Diamond In  
Way-cross*

*C. C. Phillips*

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## *Chapter 1*

“What I really need is a different horse. When we reach that settlement yonder, I fully intend to trade you off for a mount with manners.” The bay gelding flicked a could-care-less ear and snorted in response. Preston Diamond had been remonstrating the animal ever since a rather rough landing in the sage had followed an unsolicited fit of bucking. What Preston disliked the most about this particular horse was the streak of meanness or maybe devilry that caused the animal to pitch, or at least try to pitch his rider at the least opportune and most unexpected moments. Diamond had applied the spurs, whacked hell out of him with the reins and rode the horse to a lather but in a day or two the beast seemed driven to pull the stunt again. In other aspects the seven or eight year old gelding possessed the attributes any cowboy could ask for: Tough, cattle wise, a fellow could rope and shoot off him, he worked hard and took it all in stride. The horse could keep up a steady pace all day long

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and still had the energy to throw his rider at dusk. The winning feature which kept Diamond from actually carrying out his threat of selling the bay was the smooth, ground-eating stride. No matter what gait you coaxed out of him the ride was always the same. “You can drink whiskey from a cup at full gallop and never spill a drop,” had been the promise of the horse-trader who had taken Diamond's money. Well, Preston Diamond didn't often drink and ride and only occasionally did he pose as a cowboy, but the horse was *smooth*.

The pair —horse and rider— were passing through low scrub brush, sage interspersed with silver berry and the odd patch of aspen poplars. The fading, dual rutted wagon track had wound down from heavy timber higher up on the slope; probably a firewood trail. Before leaving the upper elevation Preston Diamond had glimpsed a town site in the far distance. Features were obscure but he espied a water tower confirming the settlement as a rail-road whistle-stop; a cluster of ubiquitous, inevitably clapboard-sided buildings stood amid tall, probably cottonwood trees, growing along a watercourse. Now, though the town lay obfuscated by the undulating swells of grassland, he could make out a well used trail perhaps a mile and a half

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or two across the prairie. He presumed that the wagon track would intercept this route sooner or later. No tell-tale dust cloud indicated traffic anywhere.

As the trail passed near a dense clump of buffalo berry the bay suddenly snorted in alarm. This was the second trait Diamond appreciated in the horse. Always on the alert, he had keen senses of hearing and smell as well as incredible eye-sight. Preston slept well in his lonely camp-sites since coming into possession of this equine guard dog. Unfortunately, today's circumstances did not allow sufficient forewarning.

“Hold it right there mister!” a gruff voice rasped as a rather rough looking stranger stepped onto the trail not fifteen feet ahead. The fellow hadn't been in presence of a mirror for quite some time. A week's growth of whiskers going gray along the cheeks suggested he wasn't a kid anymore. Unkempt hair and ragged clothing made a statement of a hurting economy. Wild, crazy eyes gave Diamond no reason to believe the hold-up was a bluff. Furthermore, the authoritative double barrels on the Greener clutched in shaking hands indicated that the man was currently in charge of this little gathering even though he may not be

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totally in control of his own mental faculties. From the corner of his eye Preston detected a flash of blue colour, a slight movement back in the brush. There were more than one in this party.

“Damn it.” Preston Diamond cursed under his breath as he drew rein.

“I’ll be needing that pony of your’n,” grizzly-face croaked. “So you just step down and don’t be reaching for no iron ‘cause this scattergun ain’t gonna miss from here. It’ll blow ya in half I can promise ya. I’d show ya, but don’t want the pony to gallop off without I can catch him.”

Unpredictably, but often enough at times like this (pausing for a breather, tarrying briefly to study the countryside or when some other distraction took the rider’s fancy), the gelding grew bored and performed that little trick of his. He went straight up this time, rearing on powerful hind legs. The Greener belched streaks of orange flame and black smoke from both barrels with the double charge of lead buckshot catching the plunging horse in the throat. The animal went over sideways with Preston Diamond kicking free of the stirrups clawing a Colt from its holster as he fell. More shots erupted from the cover of the scrub. Landing heavily on his left side behind the kicking, dying gelding, Diamond didn’t allow time for his breath to be knocked out. He hammered three shots at the blue streak moving in the bush on his left, rolled



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nearer his prostrate pony for protection, and poked a hole in the forehead of the former shotgun man who accordingly aborted an attempt to draw his own pistol. Dead on his feet, he dropped to the trail without a flinch.

The thrashing of the gelding subsided. A low, ominous groan issued from the patch of buffalo berry. Preston wheezed, sucking little puffs of oxygen back into his starving lungs.

Stillness crept over the scene. A fly buzzed about, then lit on on the blood soaked neck of the unfortunate mount. A raven squawked in the distance.

Remaining beside his dead horse, the subject of the imprudent hold-up assessed the situation. Probably there were no more miscreants hidden nearby. But the best teacher, experience, had proven to Preston Diamond that it does not pay to bet your life on probability.

The stirrup on the ground side of the dead horse had pulled free of the collapsing gelding as the rider had left the seat. Nine times out of ten — well, for sure three out of four, this being the fourth — that stirrup will be buckled underneath the dead animal and it is a hell of a thing to remove the saddle when that happens. It's worse if your foot happens to be stuck in there as well.

A new bullet crease angrily etched in the worn leather of the pommel indicated that the bird

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in the bush had meant business too. No further groans could be heard from that quarter. Diamond extracted his Winchester carbine from its scabbard on the upper side of the deceased bay. The gun had survived the fall; walnut stocks don't always endure the weight of a horse coming down upon them. He ratcheted a cartridge into the chamber, lay the gun across the saddle and took time to reload his Colt before cautiously getting to his feet.

Though he attuned his listening to the slightest audible discrepancy, no sound reached his ears.

The accomplice lay dead in a puddle of coagulating blood when Preston found him in the berry patch. Two of the three shots had found the mark, either one would have accomplished the same end. This fellow appeared a younger version of the shotgun man; both were total strangers to the rider from whom they had intended to beg a horse.

Shaking his head slowly and pursing his lips, Diamond addressed the air in general, "Wrong place at the wrong time." He did not specify as to who had been errant in timing and position.

The dead horse for certain could have been somewhere else, for now his owner had been left afoot. However, reason suggested that the interlopers must have at least one mount. In their brief conversation the bewhiskered shotgun man allowed that he needed *a horse*, he didn't mention

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needing more than that. Possibly the pair had picketed their animals a short distance away. Their boots, Preston noted, were quite down-at-the-heel but he doubted they had ever done much walking. A brief inspection of the terrain left only one likely spot in the near vicinity: a small aspen grove just below a ridge the horse thieves must have used as a screen to approach the patch of buffalo berry. That is where Diamond found a pair of saddled, bone-weary, sweat soaked mounts. They were better than average quality but were obviously very near exhaustion. Heads down between their knees the two barely acknowledged the approach of the stranger. Preston would have liked to let them rest but the pair would need water before morning and he needed to alert someone in authority about the shooting scrape he had just come through. He loosed the reins from the poplars and led the animals up the low slope to where his own horse lay free of tether. The smell of death brought some life back into the borrowed pair.

Diamond stripped the saddles from the mounts: one a younger black mare with three white socks and the other a mature buckskin gelding. Preston noted that both shared the same brand: Half-circle C W on-a-rail; left shoulder. He shook his head again though the burned icon meant nothing to him.

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After depositing the spare saddles on the ground beside the dead horse, Diamond threw his own rig on the buckskin. Leading the bare-backed mare he took a slow pace cross-country to the main road seen from higher up. Reflecting upon the shooting, he concluded the dead men weren't assassins but were indeed only after his mount. There were people in the world that wanted Preston Diamond dead but he doubted these two were among them; definitely not any longer. A more pertinent issue he must soon address was finding a good horse.

The sun didn't have a whole lot of work left for this day's shift as Preston entered town riding eastward along what appeared to be the middle and probably the main street. The place held the dubious name of Way-cross. Way cross what? No historical data supplied the answer; it was simply Way-cross; always had been.

Diamond had given the dead-on-their-feet horses a sparing drink at a waterhole just outside of the settlement. They wouldn't make it much further than the big red livery barn situated, unfortunately, on the far side of the town. Preston's eyes sought and found an indication of law enforcement: "Sheriff's Office" he read above a decrepit awning shading the door of a paint neglected wooden structure midway along the southern side of the

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avenue. Diamond hoped this wouldn't take long because he had a growing, gnawing hunger quarrelling with his insides and, more importantly, he really wanted to see that these horses were tended to properly without delay.

Sheriff Moody Dexter left the cordial part out of his welcome when Diamond pushed through the office door and introduced himself as Bradley McBain. That welcome quickly slipped to disappointment or maybe disgust while “McBain” related the news of his hold up about three miles from town. Noting the unease in the sheriff, Diamond concluded his narration. “I've left a bright blue rag tied to an aspen near the place. If you miss it, stay on the wagon trail and your next clue will be riding over my dead horse.”

During the recital the sheriff had taken a considerable load off his feet, though he offered no seat to the newcomer. He seemed to be having trouble rolling a smoke as the tale unfolded. Tobacco fell to the floor and his hand shook as he touched the paper to his lips. “Your description sounds like the Lester brothers. There is, or was, three of 'em.” He jerked a thumb to indicate a closed door behind him. “The third one, Kenny, the youngest, is in there... in my jail. And cons'quently why I am in this dingy damned office this late in the day.”

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“The two I met up with appeared as though they could be on the run. They weren't exactly trimmed up and styled for a box social. Their horses were whipped ragged.”

Moody struck a match on his boot heel, lit the cigarette, inhaled, then blew out a cloud of smoke. He spat a sprig of loose tobacco. “Yeah, they were born trouble, all three of 'em. Pulling little thefts here and there; rustlin' a few cows; horse thievin'; always in a small way and never really gittin' caught red-handed. Last week they graduated to bigger tricks and tried to rob the damn rail depot.” He shook his head sadly. “The bloody fools, they haven't the brains to pull off a kiddies' candy store robbery. Stafford, the clerk at the depot, winged Kenny; the other two were cut off from their nags so they swiped a couple of saddled horses tethered in front of the rail office and high-tailed it out of town.”

He sighed, his big belly slipping another notch over the wide nickel-plated buckle and cowhide belt restraining it. “I'll have to go up there in the mornin' and bring 'em in. Meantime you make certain you keep available in case I need to talk to you.”

Preston Diamond fixed the larger man with a withering stare. “You'll go bring them in tonight,” he said evenly.

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“Now look here, McBlaine, just who the hell...”

“It's *McBain*. And you look here: You can't leave a scene like that overnight. Chances of some animal molesting the corpses aside, it's indecent to even consider leaving them out there.” In a softer tone he added, “I could go with you if you're strapped for help.”

Sheriff Dexter stifled the angry protest forming on his lips. He took another long drag from the quiry. Since the failed depot robbery he had been in the saddle a lot directing a posse that, like himself, wasn't eager to hunt down members of their own community. Everyone preferred that the Lester brothers would ride away and it could all be forgotten; after all, no one except Kenny Lester had been harmed and no money was taken. His deputy, one in favour of prolonged pursuit so long as it didn't extend past the edge of town, had gone off somewhere for a few days leaving the sheriff to deal with the Lesters on his own. Moody intended to fire him upon his return. He shrugged resignedly; help tonight would be better than no help in the morning. Stubbing the roll-your-own in an over-flowing tin ashtray adorned by a cheap spur with tiny rowel, he acquiesced, “I'll hire somebody to watch the damn jail, then fetch the buckboard.”

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Preston Diamond turned to leave, "I'll see to these horses and grab a bite. We won't be up there before dark anyway."

Long shadows angled south-easterly across the thoroughfare. There was still plenty of light for Diamond to read the store-front signs posted along the street on the opposite side. He had scanned the near ones briefly on his ride halfway up the avenue to sheriff Dexter's office. Now he didn't take the time to study them in more detail because, at street level, rays from the setting sun glinted off the gun barrel about twenty feet away, pointed directly at his chest.



## *Chapter 2*

“Just turn around right there mister, real slow-like and march your sorry ass back into that sheriff's office.”

Around here, people tend to call you 'mister', Diamond thought while assessing the raw boned, heavy set man holding all the authority in his right hand. Why did gun barrels appear so enlarged when they were directed at you? Like the big Greener, the pistol had the hammer eared back. Unlike the shotgun-toter however, this fellow didn't have crazy eyes or, at least, he didn't have a crazy voice, which of course was immaterial because he seemed quite predisposed to carry out what the elder Lester only suggested.

Preston hesitated, “Now why would you be insisting so strongly that I go back in there?”

“Cause you're a horse-thief and I got me the proof standing right here beside me.”

The man never shifted his eyes but an angry tilt of his head in the direction of the dog-tired

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ponies Preston had brought to town left no question as to what he referred to. “Yeah, see that brand on the left shoulder? That there is my brand an' them horses is mine. Some of my boys saw you ride up with 'em.”

“That's not a brand, it's a goddamn paragraph,” Preston Diamond expostulated. “Half-circle C W on-a-rail! What kind of ostentatious moron uses that much iron to burn his insignia on some sorry critter's hide? How would you like it if I was to write a story on your backside with a hot poker? You dumb bastard.”

Before the horse owner could form a reply a rather complicated situation developed. It went like this:

Behind Diamond, Sheriff Moody Dexter burst through the door bawling, “Carver, drop that damned...” He would have bowled over the lighter framed man in his path but Diamond agilely stepped aside. This movement saved Preston severe damage and cost the big sheriff a good revolver. A bullet ripped through the heavy leather of the sheriff's holster striking the steel frame of the sheathed gun, shattering the grips and destroying the action. Fragments of steel and lead perforated the sheriff's ample hide. Dexter's bellow ended in a howl of pain as he went over sideways clutching at his right hip. Preston Diamond's pistol was out and talking before Dexter landed on the woodwork.

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The man the sheriff had called Carver dropped his revolver in the dust, mouth and eyes open so wide his face disappeared. Diamond's gun continued to belch smoke and hot lead. The dazed cowman in the street suddenly realized he wasn't mortally wounded. In fact, the pistol-crazed wild man he faced seemed to be aiming above and behind him. Carver suffered no bullet holes, but the muzzle blast and thunderous bark of the roaring side-arm were close enough to make his ears bleed.

Just before Moody Dexter erupted from his office, Preston Diamond had detected a shadow, a long, thin, shifting shadow just above the more defined elongated shadows in the middle of the street cast from a store front behind the angry cowman pointing the pistol. The sheriff entered the scene about the time a head-shaped blob materialized at the end of the thin shadow. Geometry hadn't been Preston's long suit during his school days but he calculated instantly where the source of that blob of shadow may be situated. It was in that general direction lead from his .45 ripped through the thin fronting boards above the store.

The shooting stopped.

Stunned, shocked silence rippled noiselessly along the street as wisps of gun smoke and the strong acrid smell of burned powder drifted lazily on the stillness. Preston Diamond broke the

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cylinder on his Colt, dropped six empty brass on the boards then fed six fresh cartridges in the six vacant holes. The exaggerated metallic sounds were strangely ominous.

The cowman, Carver, spoke first. "Jesus! Moody, I didn't shoot you!"

Dexter rolled onto his good side, clutched at an awning post and pulled himself upright. He grunted, ignoring the speaker and turned to Diamond, "McBlaine, were they shooting at you or... or was it me?"

Preston holstered his gun, "*McBain*. I'm sort of new to your town, Sheriff. Is this a common occurrence?"

Carver broke in, "Jesus! Stranger, you can operate that hog-leg! Do you figger you winged who ever shot at Moody?"

More geometry. "If this little awning hadn't been above your office that shot would have been aimed a tad higher. Maybe the assailant couldn't distinguish who he was shooting at." Diamond made this observation in a casual tone; quite casual for a fellow who had just missed out on what often is the last opportunity of a lifetime. Absolutely no doubt existed in his mind as to who the target had been.

Townfolk began to emerge along the street, congregating in little groups but keeping a good distance from the trio in front of the sheriff's office.

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Several cowboys appeared on the boardwalk at the entrance of the local beverage room. Fortunately no one had been nearby when the shooting commenced.

Carver stooped to pick up his revolver, eased the hammer forward and blew the dust out the barrel. "You hurt bad, Moody?"

"He got clean away did he?" Dexter directed the question to McBain.

"Yeah, I had nothing to shoot at so I just perforated the top of the..." Diamond looked at the offended edifice, "the seamstress's establishment. Pursuit seemed futile."

Weary of being the third person in a two-way conversation, the cowman called to the cowboys who must have been Half-Circle C W on-a-rail hands. Indicating the tired pair Diamond had brought in he said, "You boys fetch these horses down to the livery and make damn certain Ol' Ross gives them the best care he can muster."

Preston Diamond stepped down beside the gelding, loosened the cinches and pulled his rig from the horse's back. He placed the saddle on the hitching rail.

While two hired hands led the saddleless mounts away, Moody Dexter fetched out his makings. Leaning against the post with his good

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leg supporting most of the weight he twisted a quirly. To no one in particular he growled, "Damn leg hurts like hell but I don't feel no blood runnen' in my boot. Must be just bruised aplenty."

"Raised the devil with your shooter it appears," Diamond observed.

The rancher had turned to leave when Dexter called him back then made an introduction: "Carver Ward, this is Bradley McBlaine."

*"McBain."*

*"McBain* has a story to tell you about your horses. I'd be obliged if you'd listen to him while he takes you for a little journey out on the old wood road. I'd go, but my hip probably wouldn't enjoy the ride."

### *Chapter 3*

Morning in Way-cross much resembled evening except the sun peered over the buildings from the opposite side. Bradley McBain shared a small cheroot with Preston Diamond on the raised boardwalk in front of the little eatery, May-Anne's Lunch, where he had just breakfasted; washing it down with two cups of the best coffee offered to him in recent times. He stood, back to the wall of the building, barely noticeable to passers-by out in the street, beyond view from within. The town, if it was going to come to life at all, did not do so first thing in the morning. Only two light wheeled vehicles had passed along the avenue; a team and wagon were parked in front of "Leon's Mercantile" on the next block. Someone on a saddled horse had ridden east out of town. A Chinese fellow carrying a large woven basket of clothes or linen nodded a silent acknowledgement to Preston's "Good morning" as he shuffled past along the wooden walk way.

Just a thin cut over six feet, Diamond stood taller than he appeared, weighed more than he appeared and took up less room than anybody. He could, if so desired, disappear (well, not actually *disappear*, but to the casual observer, he certainly appeared to disappear). With amazing accuracy, he could mime a door frame, a tree trunk, a wagon box or what ever camouflage the moment demanded. Most people took no notice of him in a crowd or along a busy street. If he needed noticing, it was probably too late for the observer. Quiet, charismatic, magnetic to women of all ages, Preston might be in his early forties, late twenties, most often somewhere in his thirties; he had, on one occasion, been a sexagenarian. Sun tanned and wind-burned smooth shaven cheeks correctly indicated a mostly out of doors lifestyle. He had thick, dark hair, stunning powder blue eyes, a strong, handsome visage and flashed brilliantly white teeth on the rare occasion that he allowed a smile. His movements were deliberate, effortless, fluid and, when necessary, much faster than the natural eye could trace. Preston Diamond and most of his aliases wore dark clothes: browns, grays or even black; nondescript, blending in with shadow, invisible in darkness. A modest western hat crowned his head. Well attended, soft leather riding boots served his footwear needs. The



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customized, precision made-to-order Colt .45 at his hip hung so natural and unobtrusive an interested study might mark its absence. The Colt wasn't the only piece of equipment he carried but it received the most use.

Concealed in the lining of his travelling coat existed a card, a small water-proof ticket bearing the signatures of three former presidents of the United States: Preston Diamond's credentials. In his war-bag a coded message announced that this special card would require an up-date in the near future: The most recent signature had unexpectedly become void due to the assassination of the President. The card granted Preston Diamond total impunity. The "President's Man" (more accurately, "The Presidents' Man") had complete free rein to handle any situation as he deemed fitting. His job was, well... varied. Master of disguise, actor, impersonator, imposter, Preston Diamond slid with ease into any personality required. He sorted through the chaff of rumour, seeking the grains of truth; digging to the bottom of questionable operations that were of a nature serious enough to reach the ears of the nation's top executive. The man wore no badge though he might be classed a lawman; not a Pinkerton though he possessed amazing investigative talent; internal affairs or "homeland security" may broadly and occasionally describe the position, but only in as much as the

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majority of his assignments were carried out within the confines of the nation's borders. Preston received his orders directly from the President's office in the same code as the aforementioned letter. Diamond had no colleagues, no associates, no relief. He was one of a kind.

And he was very good at what he did.

The little cigar held particularly good flavour this morning and Preston thoroughly enjoyed it as he considered the developments over the past fifteen hours. By now everyone in Waycross and all in the reaches of the rural rumour ripple would have heard about the stranger who had shot dead two of the Lester boys then spoiled an attempt on Sheriff Moody Dexter's life. The story, needing no exaggeration, would be so far out of proportion, Preston himself may not recognize it.

The other customers —there were three— in the eatery had been cool, avoiding the newcomer though they were unable to mask their interest. The waitress, Preston reflected, a quite pretty lass, had been down right cold. She even refused a generous tip Diamond included with the receipt. He grinned inwardly, "What foreign object or objects had she tossed in with his biscuits, fried beef and eggs?" If anything, it had passed over his taste buds undetected and he suffered no ill effect.

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Last night, the trip out to Preston's dead horse and the subsequent return with the gruesome cargo passed without incident for Carver Ward and Bradley McBain. Ward didn't have the time to spare for the side trip—he had a ranch to run—but he and Moody Dexter were, if not close friends, at least long time acquaintances. Ward seemed duty-bound to assist the wounded sheriff.

Prior to their departure, while Carver rented the buckboard from “Ol' Ross” at the livery stable, Diamond had ordered a boxed lunch from the hotel dining room and then booked in to a room:

“Nice place you have here,” he commented to the clerk while filling out the registry.

“Yes, sir,” the fellow's Adam's apple bobbed like a short tethered yo-yo. “The Governor, he stays here quite regular.”

“Is that so? What brings the Governor to Way-cross?” Diamond asked idly.

The apple ricocheted up and down inside the long neck, “Oh, he just likes our hotel and he says the food is the best in the territory. There's a lot of important folks pass through our little town...” He leaned forward to view the registry, “Are you going to be with us long, Mr. McBain?”

“Well, I was just passing through, but maybe I'll stay longer if the room and victuals are as you say.”

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“If you're still here at the end of the week you might meet Governor Rittinger himself!”

Preston accepted his key, gripped his saddle rig in his left hand and started up the elegant, curving staircase.

“Just ask for Frank Collier, if you need anything, anything at all, Mr. McBain,” the clerk called after him.

“Odd that the clerk didn't mention hearing shots,” Diamond mused. Perhaps pistol and rifle reports were not uncommon in Way-cross. Preston stowed his grip in the room, collected his lunch from the dining lounge and met Carver Ward on the street in front of the hotel. He climbed up on the seat beside the rancher. Ward spoke to the horses and they headed west.

Upon arriving at the scene the men lit two lanterns so McBain could present his story in too real detail. The rancher, hardened to the brutalities of a frontier life, couldn't restrain the odd oath as he surveyed the grotesque and bloody figures under the pale yellow glow of the lamps. He summed it up: “Jesus! These boys picked the wrong fellow to relieve of his horse!”

A heavy tarpaulin was spread in the box of the buckboard-cum-hearse. The two human corpses were laid upon this then covered over with the extra canvass. Preston had cast one last glance

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at his dead horse before the lantern was extinguished: The gelding wouldn't care if he were the main course at the wake the coyotes would hold in his honour.

Feeling a pang of regret, Diamond studied the last bit of his cigar. He inhaled one final drag and flicked the butt out into the horse litter beyond the hitching rail. There were a few chores he must address this morning: Way-cross was the end of the line for a spur of the troubled Union Pacific Railway; here the steel stopped and the stage started. In one or the other of the two freight offices, there would be a package, a medium sized trunk, waiting for him. This he must retrieve and transport to his hotel room. Secondly, it would be prudent to check in with Sheriff Dexter. The third chore, one which he now opted to do first, was to pay a visit to the seamstress shop to make amends for shooting some daylight into the upper section.

It was a short hike along the street to the store. Truthfully, in Way-cross, it was a short hike to any establishment. A sign above the door read "Sam's Sewing Shop." Preston considered this a queer business for someone named Sam. As he approached the store Diamond studied a heavy-set, heavy-footed fellow, spurs a-jingle, striding purposely in his direction. Just then the Chinese gentleman, now carrying an empty basket, emerged

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from an adjacent building between Preston and the rough looking cowboy. Diamond read the rabid anger in the man's eyes and noted the wicked rowels on his spurs as he deliberately knocked the Chinese out of his path. The basket clattered to the boardwalk and rolled off into the filth of the street. The stricken man quickly regained his feet and glared at the retreating form of his attacker. McBain and the cowboy met in front of Sam's Sewing shop.

Spurs stopped abruptly and stabbed a finger at McBain's chest. "You son-of-a-bitch! You killed two o' my friends!"

Without further preamble the fellow swung a vicious right roundhouse at Preston's head. The fist grew immense as it neared his face and Preston felt the wind from it as he pulled back. The misplaced haymaker took the assailant off balance and he did a three-quarter pirouette, spurs tangling as he spun. Compensating agility with luck, he remained upright, growled deep in his chest and swung with his left hand. This shot missed the mark by a greater margin but Preston had had enough. As the clumsy fool waded in for a third attempt, Diamond, rattler quick and in one fluid motion, shifted a half turn, balanced on his left leg, brought his right knee up across his chest, turned his right foot outer edge leading and piston-stroked a brutal rising side kick into Spurs's solar plexus.

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The heavier man was lifted off his feet and propelled backward through the store's front window. The defenestration demolished panes, frames and tore out the dainty lace curtains. Spurs crashed to the floor in a grotesque heap amid a shower of glass. Booted feet hung limply out over the sill, one of the vicious pin-wheel rowels spun musically for a few seconds after the last tinkle of broken glass.

The Chinese fellow stared wide-eyed, then, basket in hand, skirted the inert feet, and nodded to Preston as he slipped past murmuring something that sounded like, "Velly good! Velly good!"

McBain stepped into the shop through the new opening, his feet crunching on shards of shattered window pane. He addressed a bespectacled older woman with gray hair pinned up in a tight bun. She was behind a sewing machine, mouth agape, staring in disbelief from Preston to the body on her floor.

"Er... I'm here to make right for the damages I caused to your building last night."





## *Chapter 4*

The sewing shop did not have much spare space: brightly patterned bolts of cloth, clothing under construction held together with stick pins, paper patterns, ladies' fancy dresses, men's shirts, two bins stacked to overflowing with skeins of colourful wool yarn; there were several treadle sewing machines for sale and two more apparently in use. A small glass display case which doubled as a sales counter stood to the right and a few paces back from the broken window. In the rear a partially drawn curtain revealed another room, probably a suite for the owner.

There was a dumb audience of mannequins, both male and female in various stages of dress. One, fully clothed, spoke:

“She's deaf.”

Preston sorted out the live one. “Pardon?” he said.

“She can't hear you.” The speaker came forward, stepped in front of McBain and faced the

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woman at the sewing machine. “Matilda, perhaps you should go in the back while I talk to this... man. Make us a pot of tea. I’ll be there as soon as this is settled.”

As was his habit with people in general, Diamond studied the gray haired lady as she rose and shuffled out through the curtained doorway. He asked, “If she’s deaf, how come she heard *you*?”

Preston caught his breath as he inhaled an unobstructed view of the person who now turned to face him.

She was beautiful.

As was his habit, he studied her. Posture perfect, the lady stood quite tall: seven, maybe eight inches over five feet. Thick locks of wavy blond hair cascaded down her shoulders. A bright blue dress opening at the throat accentuated her delightfully large blue eyes where tiny living flecks of silver danced; eyes made all the more enchanting as they blazed with anger. The same vexation turned her smooth cheeks a deep rose. She had a wholesome, healthy look, perfect white skin, a pretty turned up nose and small mouth with full, sensuous red lips... fearing distraction Preston halted the perusal at her neck line.

“She reads lips... Now you read mine: ‘Get out!’”

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

The cowboy on the floor groaned. Pulling his feet inside the shop with the rest of his body, he groggily attained a sitting position. “What mule kicked me?” he asked stupidly.

Preston ignored the evacuation notice. Indicating the fellow at his feet, he said, “He’ll be all right in a minute. Sorry for the mess... I’ll...”

“Out!” the lady repeated, this time accenting the order with her arm, wrist and forefinger extended toward the exit door. She even stamped a dainty foot.

“Well, Miss, I’d like to make restitution for this damage. If you could listen for a moment, I’m not totally at fault...”

“Out,” she repeated, but this time Preston hoped he detected a softer tone.

A large hat with a large head stuffed in it, darkened the recently opened window. “He’s right you know, Sam,” Sheriff Dexter interrupted. “I saw it all from my office. Muley, here, started the whole fracas. As seems to be his way, McBlaine finished it. That’s all.”

“*McBain*,” Preston corrected.

Moody Dexter limped into the shop via the doorway.

“Nice to see someone has enough decency to use the proper entrance,” the lady commented dryly.

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“On your feet, Muley,” Dexter grunted as he heaved the fellow into a semi-standing position. The sheriff eased the dazed cowboy out onto the boardwalk, then sent him stumbling off with advice to rest up for awhile.

Upon re-entering the sewing shop, Dexter studied Diamond a long moment, “What wild notion provoked him to come a-swinging at you?”

“Well, we didn't exchange any pleasantries but he mentioned something suggesting he was a friend of the Lesters.” Preston turned to the proprietor, “My name is Bradley McBain,” he held out his hand to her, “I'm obliged to repair the damage to your building. I beg you allow me that opportunity.”

She opened her mouth in retort but Dexter cut her off. “Can't ask for fairer than that, Sam. The town owes him something, you know. He saved my skin... Well, most of it. Gordie and Jess asked for what they got. Even that stupid Muley came a-huntin' the man.”

The proffered hand was ignored but the anger subsided noticeably. “I'm not shaking the hand of a killer. However, I am a business person and this is my shop. If you want to pay for fixing the window, I accept.”

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

The lady turned abruptly; with a frou-frou of skirts and an impatient clicking of heels, she disappeared behind the curtain. Habit made Preston watch her go.

Moody Bexter broke into his thoughts. “McBlaine...”

“How about you using my first name, Bradley, or Brad, and I’ll call you... Sheriff?”

“All right, but I got one strong hunch says your parents never heard of Bradley McBlaine.”

Preston let the innuendo slide. “How is your hip today? I see you’re toting a new shooter.”

Dexter had stuck a cap and ball Navy Revolver that looked as though it had, and probably did go through the war, in the bullet scarred holster he now wore reversed on his left hip. “Hip hurts a little. Doc Stohl had to extracticate some bits of shrapnel from under my hide and the leg is black and blue the size of a dinner plate. Kept me awake last night although I couldn’t sleep anyway on account of wonderin’ who in hell shot me. I finally decided it was you, not me, they was after. It’s easier to live in the town thinkin’ that way.”

McBain grinned, “It might be easier, but it could be shorter to live that way.”

Ignoring the statement, Moody continued, “I hope the town sees fit to reimburse me for my gun. This old shooter ain’t the most modern piece of artillery.” He added, “My draw is so slow it

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don't matter from which side I tug my gun out... You, on the other hand, seem to palm that Colt like magic. That's what convinced me you was the target yesterday. Somebody doesn't want you around." Dexter paused, "A-course, it could have been a mistake in identity."

While Moody spoke, Diamond walked over to one of the sewing machines where he located a seamstress's measuring tape. One end was wedged under a sewing basket. He was surprised at the weight of the basket when he shifted it over to release the tape. Must be several big pairs of scissors in there, he surmised.

The sheriff stopped talking and watched as McBain moved to the window hole and began taking measurements. "You figgerin' to fix that there window your own self?" he asked at length. "You must be one o' them ambidexterious fellers, shootin' like you do and being a carpenter too."

McBain offered no response, mentally recording his readings.

Dexter dug out his tobacco but McBain interrupted his plans. "Would you mind fetching a broom and shovel from the proprietor? I'll sweep up this mess before looking for some new glass."

Moody stowed his makings. As he hop-walked to the curtained doorway in the back he said, "Leon's Mercantile is where you'll find the glass and other stuff."

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Dexter soon returned carrying a coal shovel and a corn broom. The proprietress followed. She said in a cool but not cold voice, "I will clean up the mess. You round up someone to fill in this hole so I don't have flies in here all day and *strangers* wandering about in the night."

Ignoring the emphasis on *strangers*, McBain took the tools from the sheriff.

"Have you a large box or something else I could use to throw the debris in?"

Again she turned on her heel and disappeared in back. Dexter whistled softly. "McBl... Bradley, you got more guts than Svenson's abattoir. That gal has a temper an' if you ain't a tad more cautious around her, you'll see her in action." He shook his head, "It ain't purty."

"You seem to know her quite well," Preston observed.

"Well, I ought to. I raised her."

Incredulity rang in Diamond's voice, "She's your daughter?"

"My wife's daughter. But Samantha has been in my care since she was five. Her real Daddy died and I married his widow... You know how things go... She's a Dexter now an' is ever' bit my own daughter."

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Small town, Preston thought; in fifty years everyone will be related. “She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” A well tuned ear may have detected a faint, lingering tone of sadness in his words.

The curtain moved and Samantha returned with a container for the trash. A flush on her cheeks suggested she may have overheard McBain. If she had, she said nothing.

Dexter felt obligated to make some introductions. Following the exchange he added, “You may as well shake his hand, Sam. He's insisting on fixing the window himself.”

The cold fury that had subsided almost surfaced again but Preston headed off the outburst, “I am quite capable. It will be a special job... just for you,” he promised.

Samantha Dexter shrugged in resignation, “Well don't shoot anybody or break anything else. We run a sewing shop here, not a saloon.”

Moody winked at Diamond.

As a youth, Preston Diamond had apprenticed under the watchful eye of the handy-man-in-charge-of-the-handy-men, so-to-speak, on a rather large and well known estate. In Preston's estimation, this gifted craftsman could easily triumph over any task or project; Jack-of-all-trades, master of many, the eager protégé learned all he



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

could from the willing teacher. The master often boasted that the youth could outperform any two of his more experienced assistants. Work never daunted Preston. He had a thirst for learning — learning everything— that would not be quenched. He listened, practised, learned and retained.

A design to match the “a special job” part of Preston's promise formed in his head as Diamond made his way to the general store. Leon's Mercantile lacked some of the materials a larger centre would have provided but Preston knew well how to make-do-with-what-you-have. After purchasing the largest pane of glass available and borrowing, for a small fee, the tools he required, Way-cross's latest carpenter wandered over to the shop of the blacksmith, who doubled as wheelwright. Preston purchased a narrow rimmed buggy wheel and carried it back to the general store where he had been allowed a temporary space to work in. The new window was ready for installation an hour before the sewing shop would close for the day.

Samantha Dexter, measuring tape in one hand, fly-swatter in the other, gasped in astonishment as her grinning step-father and McBain hoisted the finished product into the vacant hole Preston had created earlier that day. The new unit fit exactly. It had several small panes moulded

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into each of the quadrants forming the four outer corners. This configuration contained the buggy wheel with hub and spokes removed. A large sheet of heavy glass, cut in a perfect circle, was framed inside the wheel. Dexter held the window while Preston hammered home the nails that would make it permanent.

The proprietress had not managed any words throughout the installation. Preston tossed the hammer in the buckboard he and Dexter had used to deliver the new window. Turning to the shop keeper he said, "I'll install some putty around the edges for you. Tomorrow I'll paint the frame," He paused, "Do you like it?"

"Oh...oh, it's wonderful... I had no idea you were making something so elegant. It looks like it should be in Boston or New York, not Way-cross."

"Thank-you," he said simply.

Diamond turned to his helper, "Thanks, Sheriff," he said. "I would have had a devil of a time installing it alone. Any aggravation to the sore leg?"

Moody shook his head, "Nope... By-the-way, nice work there McBain."

Diamond climbed aboard the buckboard. "There ought to be a package for me at one of the freight offices. May as well pick it up while I have this cart rented."

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“It's at the rail depot,” Dexter called. Then in answer to McBain's questioning glance. “It's been there over a week; addressed to a Bradley McBlaine... Everybody knows everybody's business in Way-cross.”

McBain lightly slapped the lines over the rumps of the horses and the buckboard rolled ahead. Sheriff Dexter limped across the street to his office. Samantha stood on the boardwalk in front of her new window watching the driver of the retreating wagon. There was something vaguely disturbing about the man. She re-entered her fabric shop. Matilda was busy at her machine gathering frills for a new dress.

Samantha “Sam” Dexter had opened her sewing shop in a small building that formerly belonged to the town barber. In her second season the business began to show profit. The workload grew and Samantha placed an advertisement for an assistant. Matilda Frye, the deaf lady, responded. Samantha met Mrs. Frye at the stage, inspected her samples and hired her on the spot. The pair got on quite well. Matilda, though solemn and difficult to communicate with, turned out excellent work. Samantha made no objection to her new employee's

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occasional trips out of town for a week or two at a time to visit her daughter and grandchild. Matilda moved into the tiny suite in back of the sewing shop.

When Sam's father had passed away, all he owned (not a significant amount) went to his wife and little daughter. The young widow refused to touch the inheritance and took in sewing to make ends meet. After two years she married Alan "Moody" Dexter who owned a thirty head spread on the edge of Way-cross. The ranch, while run well, made scant profit and scarcely paid the bills so Moody had taken the sheriff's job when the town fathers offered it to him. Somehow the couple still managed to retain most of the inheritance, even adding to it in the good years. This money was earmarked for furthering Sam's education, something her paternal father had dearly wished he could provide.

School work came easily to the bright child and she excelled.

By her early teens, Sam expressed an interest in sewing. Her mother willingly taught her the needles and threads, as it were, of the trade. Very soon she became quite proficient, so much so that mother and daughter decided to set up a small business working out of their home. This venture went better than they dreamed.

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Of course, Samantha wished to honour her dead father's wishes, however, the school in Way-cross had a limited level of education. Moody and Mrs. Dexter arranged to enroll their daughter in a boarding school in Boston. Sam's mother's eyesight had begun to fail so the sewing business came to an end. Samantha rode the train to Boston, moved into the boarding school and commenced her studies. Here the blond haired beauty from Way-cross demonstrated that, though she was a small town girl unaccustomed to the twisted sophistication of a big city, she lacked not at all in mental capability. A year and a half went by, Samantha Dexter always at the top of the class. Though chronically homesick, cherishing those glorious days of summer vacation back home, she determined to fulfil the last request of the father she could barely recall.

During a mild spell in mid-winter Sam and a girl friend were out for an afternoon stroll. The weather had been so fair they had not realized the time passing until the gathering darkness dawned on them. They were a long way from their dormitory and in an unfamiliar part of the city. Hurrying through a wooded area they were brutally attacked by two thugs. Samantha fought like a demon, drawing blood with every rake of her long fingernails. She kicked and punched viciously, screaming for help. Her cries were heard and a

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young policeman dashed to the scene. He quickly rendered the attacker senseless. Samantha — bruised, clothes torn and bloody— struggled for breath. At last she gasped, “Where's Lenore? Where is my friend?”

Help did not arrive soon enough to save Lenore.

Samantha Dexter boarded the next train back to Way-cross; to home; vowing never to travel east again.

The remainder of the education fund paid for the start-up of Sam's Sewing Shop.

Preston had to agree with the hotel clerk's assertion; the dining room indeed offered surprisingly delicious meals. The menu outclassed any he had seen in his travels through a hundred towns the size of Way-cross. He polished off a big slab of steak done just the way he ordered it, along with roasted potato, interestingly flavoured mixed vegetables, and a bowl of chowder. “Perhaps I'll drop in later for that dessert,” he told the waitress, by way of refusal.

Returning to his room, he lit a cheroot and commenced an inventory of the luggage he had retrieved from the freight depot. When leaving a town on horseback, Diamond sent his extra baggage via train or stage depending on what

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logistics were available. He never shipped direct, it went a circuitous route to be collected, then forwarded by one of two officials who had earned Diamond's trust and respect.

Earlier, upon locating the small trunk at the depot, Preston had noted two peculiarities: first, McBain had been misspelled in unfamiliar script (normally the address contained a coded insignia); secondly, the chest had been forced open. Setting the little cigar aside he now inspected the chest more thoroughly. The contents had been searched though an attempt had been made to conceal the fact. Nothing had been taken. Preston breathed a sigh of relief. The trunk contained no confidential or revealing documents though someone must have been searching for such; another indication his arrival in Way-cross was anticipated. Along with apparel for a colder season or climate, there were personal effects: two suits of dress clothes, low topped shoes of the same soft leather as his riding boots, several trinkets of meaning and value only to the owner, four volumes: a poetry and prose collection of Edgar Alan Poe (Preston could recite "*The Raven*"); his favourite: Chaucer's "*Canterbury Tales*"; Herman Melville's "*Moby-Dick*"; Parisian author Jules Verne's "*The Mysterious Island*". The latter was written in French. Tucked in a corner wrapped in soft calfskin lay a gold pocket watch and fob. Also

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wrapped in calf-skin, a hand size brass telescope. A beautifully engraved Remington pistol of .44 calibre lay in its tooled leather holster. A long case of sturdy construction rested diagonally across the bottom of the trunk. Preston withdrew the gold watch, wound it, flipped open the lid and set the time according to another time-piece he carried on his person. He then spent five quiet minutes gazing at the tiny portrait photograph of a lovely dark-haired lass fastened in the watch cover: a young lady, in her teens; Preston had been a teenager then too. He closed the lid tenderly and returned the watch to the chest. Diamond then extracted the elongated case and set it on his bed. Inside lay a Joseph Whitmore .451 calibre "Sharpshooter"; a masterpiece of long range shooting artillery. The rifle had been modified to facilitate quick dismantle and set-up, allowing for discretion and easy transport. A fixed three-power scope, an improved version of the Confederate Army model, was solidly attached to the barrel. Ammunition packets were stored in a separate compartment within the case. The Whitmore could consistently group five shots in a ten inch circle at eight hundred yards. As was his custom, Diamond carefully examined both firearms, searching for signs of tampering, checking the balance, testing the action. Satisfied, he wiped them down with an oil cloth and returned the guns to the trunk. Neither the Remington nor



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the Whitmore had seen much service but Preston felt reassured to know they were there and ready when needed. The articles he had brought into this hotel room: the trunk with its treasures, the saddle, Winchester carbine in its scabbard, the bedroll doubling as war-bag, and the items on his person were Preston Diamond's sole possessions in all the world. There were no living relatives he knew of. He had a sizeable bank account somewhere but he did not consider it a possession of significance. After locking the trunk Preston looped a fine thread across the opening. If further tampering occurred he would know.

Diamond relit the cheroot, studied the street below his window, then turned his scrutiny to the room he occupied. It was a spacious, corner accommodation, having one window on the street side and another giving a view to the south. In that direction, Preston could see a mile or more along the wagon road that had brought him to Way-cross. The room came equipped with washstand, two mirrored dressing tables, two chairs—one an ornate high-backed wooden piece, the other a padded leather arm chair—wardrobe and an exquisitely comfortable bed. The previous night, though it had been quite late Preston completed some minor rearrangements of the furnishings. He moved the quilted bed out of line of the frilly

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curtained windows and shifted the dressing tables so that the mirrors, while reflecting on themselves could also be studied from the bed. He had then fallen asleep as soon as his head struck the pillow.

This evening Preston felt no fatigue, just a mild soporific dose from eating a little too greedily; a slip normally guarded against for those circumstances when he had to go into action without time for a healthy digestion. The cigarillo burned down and Preston stubbed it in a hotel ashtray. Removing his boots he stretched out on the bed with a sigh of satisfaction. Fragments of an obfuscated plot danced through his mind as he sought to piece together recent events.

Who had taken the shot at him in front of the sheriff's office yesterday? The shadow on the street indicated only that the attacker wore no hat. A split-second glimpse at the back of the retreating figure's head had been thoroughly inconclusive, but Preston had noticed an irregularity. What was it? Intuition, a subliminal suggestion, had prevented him from pursuing the fugitive after the shooting stopped. His bullets, six of them, hadn't come too close to the target. He knew this for a fact because he had deliberately aimed to miss. Why? Relating his story to Sheriff Dexter had taken less than half an hour. How did someone have time to climb up on Samantha's shop and be in position for an attempt on Preston's life? How did they even know

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he was in town? No one could have recognized him; *no one* knows him! For the hundredth time he considered and discarded the idea the Lester attack had been anything more than what it appeared. Still, coincidences are more rare than most people believe.

Preston's active mind reviewed the circumstances which placed him in Way-cross. For more than four months his time had been devoted to this assignment. The job required: Investigate and bring to justice concerned persons involved in alleged hostile take-over of territorial bank(s). Further details were scant: no mention of a senator, governor or other government representative who had carried the complaint to the President's attention; no name of an official or enforcement officer in the field who would supply additional information; Diamond had been given the name of a town from which to start: Lizzy's Falls....



## *Chapter 5*

Preston slipped into the quiet foothills village of Lizzy's Falls on a cold but sunny day in mid February. The town had little to offer; the population was so small the mayor, the town drunk and the village idiot were all the same person. The diminutive urban centre did however, serve a rather extensive rural population. 'Foreigners' seldom passed through Lizzy's Falls so folks immediately marked the presence of a visitor despite Diamond casting a very thin shadow. Reserved to the point of being tight-lipped, the locals refused to talk to the newcomer. But locals do talk to each other and a stranger can listen: Rumour suggested that the new banker was "a son-of-a-bitch".

Since the financial man had arrived in Lizzy's Falls, foreclosures had become a very real nightmare for ranchers, farmers, businesses... everyone. Interest rates escalated, loans were called in early. An exaggeration of the gossip suggested that those who resisted fell into a pattern

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of “bad luck”. In less than a year, the new bank management owned two substantial businesses and thousands of acres of ranch land; Diamond soon verified this last information finding it quite accurate. He found it difficult to meet with the new banker; impossible to talk to his predecessor — He was dead.

Lizzy's Falls Bank had belonged to the Corbett family since the town began. The Corbetts were well established in the community and had earned the trust of its citizens. Unfortunately, *too much* trust. There was too much money out on the books. When Earl Corbett was found dead in his home, people wondered at his sudden passing. The doctor, a recent addition to the Lizzy's Falls population, announced it had been heart failure. No one argued, “He's the doctor, he ought to know.”

A stranger, “the son-of-a-bitch”, bought the bank from Earl Corbett's widow.

Preston did not remain long in Lizzy's Falls. He began a comprehensive large-scale investigation, methodically collecting information throughout the territory. The quiet, unobtrusive stranger visited dozens of towns boasting a financial institution. His research revealed that twenty-nine banks had changed hands over the previous two and a half years! Not all, but many had questionable ownership transfer. Tales of

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client foreclosures similar to those of Lizzy's Falls, accompanied nearly every take-over. All of a sudden, the assignment had grown exponentially. How many people would be required to organize, direct, and successfully manage such an extensive program? Where was the base for the operation? Who engineered the project and now stood at the helm?

Preston Diamond needed a more hands-on approach. He opted to investigate the monopolization from another angle.

One day a slope-shouldered, mousy chap named Frazier Wentworth arrived on the noon stage in Clarkston. People did not pay him a lot of attention for he was quite unremarkable. The newcomer found employment as clerk in the town's only bank. Frazier Wentworth punctually showed up at work and he punctually went to his boarding house accommodation at the end of his work day. He said little around the office; taciturn but courteous with customers, his only complaint was that he feared the loaded .38 calibre revolver stowed in a compartment above the cash drawer at his teller station. He abhorred guns and they frightened him. Wentworth had two co-workers:

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Mabel Galveston, a prim and strict spinster who, in her opinion, ran the entire banking operation; Herman Goldman the manager, a shrewd financial man who also owned the institution.

The new bank clerk had taken up residence at "Old Mrs. Boyle's" boarding house. Among his fellow boarders (three men of varying age) Frazier Wentworth maintained his quiet, aloof demeanour, speaking only when spoken to, replying in crisp short sentences, discouraging further conversation. The man was so reserved he didn't even complain about the food. Nothing could be said, for meals generally consisted of potatoes, more potatoes and a speck of mystery meat. Weak tea and no dessert accompanied the banquet.

An exception to Wentworth's reserve occurred almost daily while walking the few blocks to his work place. The clerk invariably passed by the little green and white cottage where Clarkston's school ma'am, Miss Sarah Dickens, resided. Strictly by *chance*, the lady *happened* to be on her way to the school house whenever the bank man *happened* along. Maybe in her late twenties, nearer 'homely' than 'pretty', Frazier decided 'plain' appropriate and, in consideration of the monotony of the western village, he would not deny a physical attraction toward her. She always wore her chestnut hair pulled tightly back from her face wound up in an unflattering knot behind her head.



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Her long stride and curt manner did not invite conversation but Frazier managed to draw her out after a few encounters. The meetings progressed from a guarded “Hello” from Wentworth, with no response from Miss Dickens, to a cheerful, “Fine day isn't it, Miss Dickens?” with a disinterested, “Good morning,” from the school teacher.

Clarkston's town officials had voted in favour of establishing a library in their community. That had been two years previous, however no books, no shelves, no librarian and no edifice to accommodate them had as yet been provided. One evening Frazier Wentworth had been out for stroll when he noticed the door of the village school ajar. The thought occurred to him that fresh reading material might be obtained here. He knocked on the door, pushed it open and stepped in. Over the top of her spectacles a very surprised Miss Dickens glared at the intruder. The teacher had a fountain pen in her hand; she had been correcting some examination papers.

Wentworth stuttered, “Um... Good evening, Miss Dickens... sorry to barge in... the door was open...”

“What is it you are looking for Mr. Wentworth?” she asked coldly.

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“Er... the town doesn't have a library... Er... And I was wondering if I might borrow a text or two from your school.” He added quickly, “I'll return them right away....”

Realizing the man's intentions were decent Miss Dickens's voice mellowed. Removing her spectacles and placing them on the papers she had been perusing, she asked, “What kind of reading are you interested in?”

A lengthy conversation ensued, Wentworth grew impressed with her knowledge, Miss Dickens impressed with his. They realized a common bond.

“There isn't anything in the school which would satisfy your reading demands, all we have here are children's books and school texts.”

Wentworth failed to conceal his disappointment.

“But I do have some of my own books which you might enjoy... in my house.”

Stars and a full moon lit the avenue as the book enthusiasts made their way to the little frame home where Sarah Dickens resided.

Noting Frazier's hesitation at the entrance Miss Dicken's assured, “It's quite all right, Mr. Wentworth, you may come in.”

Frazier Wentworth waited on the step; Preston Diamond went inside.

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The scholarly stoop, the shuffling, hesitant stride, the shy, gauche Wentworth cast, disappeared while the teacher lit an overhead lantern. The pale warm glow illuminated a tiny kitchen. Sarah issued no surprise upon turning to face her new guest. Preston, on the other hand, was absolutely shocked to witness the change in Miss Dickens. The stern, no-nonsense pedagogue evaporated before him. In a low, seductive voice, a very arousing Sarah Dickens said, "Follow me, the best stories are in my bedroom."

Lighting a second, portable lamp, she led Preston through a low doorway into a room adjoining the kitchen. Sarah placed the lamp on a bedside table, reached behind her head and extracted the pins binding up her hair. Beautiful chestnut curls cascaded down her shoulders. She shook her head allowing the locks to tumble further. Preston stood riveted, speechless as she began to unfasten the dress which here-to-fore had been unflattering. While her hands were busy the lady watched Diamond, she seemed amused by his immobility. The dress slipped to the floor, soon followed by frilly white undergarments. Naked, she stood before him holding out her hand in invitation. "I have a book you may wish to read."

His anticipation visible, Preston came forward, taking the proffered hand, "I trust it is written in Braille..."

Boredom in Clarkston disappeared for Preston Diamond as he regularly honed his reading skills under the tutoring of the eager Miss Sarah Dickens. However, the banking problem, his reason for being in Clarkston, had not reached any specific conclusions. Preston Diamond, in his guise as Frazier Wentworth, kept a watchful eye on the comings and goings at the Clarkston financial building. Mostly routine transactions were in order with nothing out of the ordinary cropping up. On night time forays Preston Diamond, as himself, often checked the bank and watched Mr. Goldman's house. Time passed and still there continued to be no indication of a glitch in the small town's monetary matters. It appeared that Clarkston may be spared the financial woes suffered by so many other institutions in the territory. Preston began to feel uneasy about his decision to move to this location. He had no 'outside' information and could not know what may be happening elsewhere. A man of physical action, the banking industry did not stimulate Preston at all.

An unkempt, self-appointed tough in the town, who went by the name of Ballard —whether his first or last name, no one specified— often made jeering remarks to Frazier Wentworth whenever chance allowed them to meet along the street. Preston ignored the tormentor and easily

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

stepped around him. The man held no obvious employment for he always seemed to be in the way. Growing tired of the harassment Preston allowed himself to be cornered by the brute. "You be'n stepping out to see that school marm!" Ballard accused. "I don't like no scrawny bank boy hanging around with the teacher. Maybe you ought to take some learn'en from me."

In Preston Diamond's voice the *scrawny* clerk growled softly, "Unhand me *now* or I'll break your arm."

Ballard, surprised and confused, released Frazier's shirt, allowing him to pass.

"That won't be the end of that," Preston mused to himself as he shuffled away.

Early spring chiselled at the ice of late winter when one bright afternoon two well-dressed strangers bearing the dusty signs of coach travel entered the bank building. They cordially asked to see Mr. Herman Goldman. Mabel Galveston ushered the pair into the banker's office and closed the door. The retreat was not entirely sound-proof as Preston had determined on other occasions, so he now moved closer to the glass window separating the inner office from the main chamber. Ostensibly working with a file of papers he strained his hearing. The strangers were unsuccessfully attempting to coerce Goldman into selling his establishment. The meeting lasted more than half

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an hour. Voices raised and Frazier could see that his employer steadily lost patience; his florid face turned redder and his eyes began to bulge as he argued with the intruders. At last, blustering to the point of spitting, the banker unceremoniously held the door for the strangers asking them in no uncertain terms to, "get out!"

One of the men smiled mirthlessly. Stepping past the banker he said lubriciously, "When you change your mind, and believe me Goldman, you will change your mind, send word to Way-cross." He roughly stuffed a small paper in the bankers vest pocket.

Diamond would have dearly loved to see what had been written on that note.

Further visits were not paid to the bank but Preston could see the agitation growing. Goldman, normally of reasonably good humour, became withdrawn. He spent long hours in his office seldom even speaking to his staff. Mabel Galveston expressed concern and Frazier Wentworth stepped up his surveillance.

Night time found Preston Diamond disappearing in the familiar deeper darkness of the maple tree trunk just outside Herman Goldman's parlour window. The investigator had spent considerable time in this spot: Waiting; guarding; spying. A cheerful fire blazed on the hearth making Diamond wish he could stand a little closer instead

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of skulking out here in the garden. He studied Goldman through the glass: Vexation grew on the banker's face as Preston watched him tear open a mail delivery, hastily reading through it. This marked the third such delivery Diamond had witnessed. He could only guess as to the contents, for inevitably, Goldman angrily threw the paper in his fire.

There were times Preston Diamond would have liked to reveal his identity but he could ill afford any acclaim or recognition. If he could confide in Goldman the riddle may unfold much quicker. Could the financier be trusted to discretion? Conceivably, Goldman would confer with Mabel Galveston; perhaps, like Frazier Wentworth, her role ran deeper than appearances suggested. The second time the beleaguered banker had received a disturbing letter, Diamond quietly forced a window and slipped into the parlour after his employer had gone off to bed. By the pale orange light of the dying embers he found ] a corner of the charred missive: *ay-cross* was all he could make out.

But it was enough.

“Why stay on in Clarkston?” he asked himself. Instinct? Gut feeling? A vague fragment of subconscious haunted the rim of his thinking; something suggested more of the puzzle lay here. Perhaps a wish to help Goldman? Sarah Dickens

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certainly held an attraction but Preston Diamond refused to allow pleasure to supersede the demands of his work. He reflected a moment upon the school teacher: She understood more of Diamond than he had wanted revealed. She knew full well that Frazier Wentworth was not the man inside the skin of the shuffling, bumbling bank clerk. Sarah asked no questions, apparently content to have Diamond any way he cared to present himself. One day he would leave and she would miss him.

The Clarkston Bank opened to the public at ten AM, Monday through Saturday. Herman Goldman gave his employees a day off on Sundays and if things were quiet they closed early on Saturday afternoon. Frazier Wentworth and Mabel Galveston personified punctuality, arriving precisely at nine AM, giving themselves an hour to prepare before customers were allowed inside the bank. At eleven-thirty, Mabel took her half hour lunch break. When she returned, Frazier went out for his repast. Mr. Goldman kept his own hours, putting in more time than his employees and did not adhere to Mabel's strict routine. There weren't many customers in a day, however, work held steady enough to warrant a second clerk.



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Mabel Galveston had been gone five minutes for her lunch break when two gentlemen, not regular clients, entered the bank. Frazier did not recognize the men as one strode directly toward Goldman's office, the other approached the cashier.

"Trouble!" Preston Diamond's instinct warned immediately.

The near stranger confronted Wentworth with a muzzle of cold steel aimed at his chest. Through the thin brass bars of the teller cage the man barked gruffly, "Empty that cash drawer into this bag."

From the corner of his eye Preston watched the second man push open the door to Goldman's office. The intruder very coolly raised a cocked pistol and casually, deliberately, shot the banker in the head. Goldman went over backward taking his heavy, high-backed chair with him. The thief at the teller window risked a quick glance toward the commotion.

It wasn't quick enough.

Through the oak board below the wicket opening Preston fired the hidden .38 that Frazier Wentworth had so often complained about. Lead and splinters entered the gunman's abdomen, ripping through his body and smashing viciously into the lower spine. A look of gray sickening horror aborted the spreading shock of surprise on his face. The smoking gun came out of the powder

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burned cabinet and Preston swung toward the office window in one smooth motion. Deliberately he waited until the assassin turned to face him. The second shot from the .38 blew out the pane of glass in the office showering the target with deadly shards of glass. The wicked little slug deflected minimally, catching the assassin full in the face, lodging somewhere inside his skull. Knees buckled, torso folded, head tilted forward, chin rested on the chest, then the body collapsed like a blood splattered house of cards on the office floor.

Fortunately, or most likely through careful timing of the attackers, no other customers were in the building at the moment. Preston ran along the stall, vaulted the doorway and checked the misguided soul writhing in agony on the floor in front of the teller station. He fired a killing charge, a mercy shot, into the fatally wounded fellow. Reaching through Mabel's wicket window Diamond grasped a three-quarter full tumbler of sipping water the spinster always kept at her till. Dumping the contents inside the front of his pants he smashed the glass against the oak frame of the wicket. Overturning several chairs, he strewed papers about the foyer and randomly fired off the remaining cartridges in the pistol.

When town sheriff, Wiley Beason, arrived seconds later, through the acrid smoke hanging in the room he found Frazier Wentworth trembling

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

uncontrollably, the front his pants soaked from crotch to boots, cocking and firing the empty pistol which he held aimed at the dead man on the floor. Beason stepped over and gently tugged the gun from Wentworth's reluctant fingers.

“They... they shot... they shot Mr. Goldman,” Wentworth stammered, his chest heaving great gasps as he failed to regain composure.

Mabel Galveston burst into the foyer, stopped abruptly to survey the carnage then rushed to Goldman's office. Her cries turned to heart-broken sobs as she sank to the floor kneeling beside the body of her former employer.

Sheriff Beason read the scene exactly as Preston Diamond had directed it: “Two strangers tried to hold up the bank, shot the manager and were in turn shot by a fear crazed, panic stricken clerk.”

The word spread around the town Frazier Wentworth had gone berserk during a robbery attempt at the bank. Sheriff Beason repeated over and over again, to anyone who might listen, “Wentworth was so scarit, he pissed hisself!” Shaking his head in mock disbelief, he chuckled, “He jist stood there a'shooten off that empty gun. I had to take it away on 'im and set 'im down on a chair. Never seen a man so scarit.”

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The distracted clerk had left the bank building still trembling with fright and embarrassment as he shuffled miserably toward his lodgings.

Frazier Wentworth entered the front door of Mrs. Boyle's Boarding House; minutes later, Preston Diamond emerged out the back. Neither Sheriff Beason nor his audience made any connection between the dark clad, solemn stranger who rode out of town late that afternoon and the timid, gun-shy Frazier Wentworth.

Ballard, sporting a new plaster-of-paris cast on his right arm, watched him go.

## *Chapter 6*

So the trail had led to Way-cross. News of Diamond's intended arrival had travelled faster than he had and, consequently, someone in the little town wanted him dead. Back in Clarkston the furore caused by the foiled bank robbery obfuscated the fact that the pant-pissing clerk had disappeared. Preston knew the robbery had been entirely staged, hiding the truth: a deliberate, calculated assassination. A stroke of luck for the conspirators, the package had become all the more neat and tidy because Diamond's shooting prowess had left no finks.

But someone in Clarkston knew Preston had left town. And they also knew, or made a very lucky guess, where he was headed.

Preston swung his legs over the side of the bed and tugged on his soft leather riding boots. He took another long look through the hotel window. Darkness had descended on Way-cross's main street. Stepping out into the hall, he quietly closed

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the heavy oak door then attached another of the minute seals across the small gap between door and jamb. Silently Diamond moved down the ornate stair and exited out the back of the hotel. Frank Collier did not look up as Preston drifted by.

No street lamps illumed this area, only a single lantern shone dimly above the hotel door. The night grew darker in the alley beyond. Preston took a long moment for his pupils to adjust. Continuing along the lane he sorted out the location of Sam's Sewing Shop. Perhaps a thread might be found here.

A trash can carnivore yowled menacingly then bolted away disappearing in the opaqueness. By the light glowing dimly through the curtained window of the older seamstress's suite Preston discovered a small veranda separating the rear of the store from the dirt of the backstreet. He carefully tested the boards for squeaks before hoisting his frame onto the platform. Access to the roof of the building would have been easy for an agile person: Sturdy boxes —possibly treadle sewing machine crates— were stacked in a natural step as high as the eave. Edging nearer the window, Diamond removed his hat; easing up to the glass he allowed one eye to study the lighted room. It was a minuscule kitchen. On the very edge of his vision the peeping-Preston made out a doorway which probably led to a small bedroom.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

In full view he could see the curtained entry that opened into the sewing shop. Matilda, Samantha's deaf employee, sat at a tiny dining table, reading glasses perched on her forehead. Though her graying hair remained tied up in a bun at the back of her head, the widow looked strangely younger in the soft light of the lantern. Preston did not think of her as a typical little old grandmother. The lady appeared to be quite absorbed with a thick folder of papers on the table in front of her. She riffled through the sheaf pausing occasionally to peruse a document or to make annotations. What information so closely demanded the widow's attention? She must perform the accounting duties of the store as well as seamstress work.

Apparently satisfied, Matilda collected the papers and meticulously stowed them in the folder. A kettle began to steam on the wood stove; Preston heard its whistle through the window. Mrs. Frye made a pot of tea, moved to a rocking chair opposite the table and took up a piece of mending. Preston recalled the steady click, click, click of the busy needles when his mother knitted by the fire. He was very young and that seemed a long time ago....

Cautiously withdrawing from the window, Preston stepped down onto the dusty cinder and ash strewn alley, then continued along toward the next side street. Two more feline felons protested his

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nocturnal passage. A door banged loud behind him, an angry voice gave vent to the quarrelling cats. Diamond followed the side-street to the main avenue, angled across, hitting the boardwalk just in front of the sheriff's office, where a light burned dimly through the dust coated window.

Preston knocked on the door and pushed his way inside without waiting for the customary, "Come in".

A white haired old-timer sat in Sheriff Moody Dexter's chair. By the eerie yellow light of a coal-oil lantern the fellow had been reading a tattered nickel novel. He looked up at the intruder, set the book on the desk and reached for a pipe in the spur ashtray beside him. Offering no greeting, he studied Preston over the flare of a match. Satisfied the pipe had taken sufficient fire he blew out a cloud of gray smoke. "Ja, so you vill be the McBlaine."

"*McBain*," Preston corrected, extending his right hand.

"Ole Evenson," the older man accepted the handshake. "My prisoner," Ole pointed the evil smelling pipe indicating the closed door behind him, "He wants to shoot you for killing his brothers."

"Really!" Preston grinned.



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

The night watchman warmed to the smile. “Ja, I varn him, he might be dead too if he comes looking for you.”

Preston Diamond visited with the jailer for fifteen minutes before reaching the point of his intrusion. “Ole, I'd like to talk to Kenny Lester, if I may.”

Ole shrugged, “Vell, he hasn't had much company and he von't be talking until Friday when the Circuit Judge comes to town. Only the mayor's daughter and the doctor have been allowed in here to see him.”

Seeing the question on McBain's face, Ole added, “Barbara, waitress for the May Anne's, she brings Kenny his supper after the sheriff has gone home...”

An uncomfortable pause followed as Ole studied his pipe; Preston studied Ole. Finally the Norwegian shifted his gaze to Preston's face. Pointing with the pipe stem toward the Colt on Diamond's hip he said, “You have to give your gun to me and I vill go in there with you.”

Kenny Lester had seen fewer and probably better years than his deceased brothers. Having plenty of time available in his confinement he had shaved and groomed himself. Apparently still awake at the late hour, the harassed look of the damned haunted his dark features. By the light from Evenson's lantern Preston noted the tell-tale

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circles beneath troubled eyes. The last of the Lester brothers hadn't been sleeping well lately. A clean white bandage was wrapped around the young prisoner's left wrist. Kenny anxiously peered through the bars trying to establish who trailed behind the night man. Someone had kept the captive informed for he suddenly yelled, "Ole! Get that son-of-a-bitch away from me! He killed my brothers!" His voice raised in angry torment, "I swear by all that's Holy, when I get out of this hole, I'll escort that bastard to hell myself."

Preston tried several tacks but the quarrelsome thief had worked himself into a screaming frenzy steadily growing more abusive and belligerent. Turning to the night guard, Diamond apologised, "Sorry for your time, Mr. Evenson."

As the visitors reached the doorway, Lester grabbed the chamber pail and hurled the stinking contents through the bars. The filth fell short of the intended targets but the insane, screamed threats of bloody murder filled their ears. The sound softened considerably when the jailer closed the solid wooden door on the dark and foul cell block.

Ole Evenson shook his head sadly as he returned the Colt to Preston Diamond. "Ja, he is going the loco, Kenny Lester is."

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Next morning Preston Diamond enjoyed an after-breakfast cigar while admiring his carpentry handiwork of the day before. Samantha hadn't opened the shop yet and Preston waited to fulfil the promise of painting and sealing the window frame. He also felt obligated to patch the holes in the upper level before woodpeckers or flickers may gain entry. From under the brim of his hat Diamond studied the seamstress and the sheriff as, together, they walked toward his location. They had emerged from the side street leading to the livery stable and from this Preston surmised that Samantha still lived at the ranch with her mother and Dexter. It made sense the two should travel together to town. Maybe the town administration paid Dexter's livery fees. The man appeared an unlikely candidate for regular cleaning of a horse stall if there happened to be a barn associated with the sheriff's office.

The step-father and daughter were several yards away before they noticed Diamond. He spoke first, "Sheriff." He tipped his hat to the lady, "Miss Dexter... I've come to finish the job, as promised."

Samantha's smile, though brief, shamed the sunshine. "You are persistent, Mr. McBain."

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Moody Dexter merely grinned and veered off across the street to his office. Preston noted the limp had almost disappeared. As the proprietress unlocked the shop, Diamond excused himself and headed down the street toward Leon's Mercantile.

The remaining repairs were completed in short order. During his time on the roof of the sewing shop Diamond tried to re-enact the movements of the sniper who had attempted to kill him. All he found was a small piece of clothing, a torn remnant which had been recently hooked on a protruding nail head. He pocketed the piece, collected his tools and climbed down from the roof.

"You are both creative and thorough in your work, Mr McBain," Samantha Dexter begrudged approvingly upon viewing the finished window. Fresh white paint glistened on the outer frame, the smaller wooden partitions and on the iron rim of the buggy wheel. Preston had meticulously wiped away smudges leaving the panes pristine.

To the disappointment of the temporary carpenter the lovely seamstress declined an invitation to lunch at the hotel. Her cold distrust had melted however and Preston could almost feel the radiation of natural warmth dancing in her eyes. "Maybe some other time," he said softly.

"Maybe some other time, Mr. McBain."

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Diamond decided to visit Way-cross's financial institution. A direct approach may save hours of legwork and at the same time avoid arousing further suspicion among the townspeople. He did not feel it prudent to quiz Sheriff Dexter. McBain's purpose for being in Way-cross had not been brought to question and Preston Diamond hoped to keep it that way. Only himself and the person or persons who wanted him dead need know.

Banker Patrick O'Malley shook Diamond's hand with a grip to put a man at ease, then offered a seat in his small but handsomely furnished office. On two occasions Diamond had observed the Way-cross banker on the street striding purposefully to or from his work. He wore a well brushed brown derby hat, a businessman's suit and polished low cut shoes. In closer proximity now, while maintaining a conversation about the prospects of buying property, Preston discreetly studied the man and his surroundings. O'Malley was of average height, carried a few extra pounds and had less reason to visit the barber than a younger man. The hair he still possessed formed an even gray circle around his head as though the fellow had been meticulously scalped. The derby he wore on the street concealed the baldness perfectly. He had keen, hazel eyes, an odd combination of piercing and sincerity; eyes that saw further into you than

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may feel comfortable if you had something to hide. Diamond detected no false undertone, no negative aura, no instinctive warning to suggest Patrick O'Malley could be anything less than he presented on the surface. Preston survived by being able to read men, get inside their minds and know what they were thinking: If the money-man proved counterfeit he was far too good to be stuck in Way-cross.

“We're a family bank here in Way-cross,” O'Malley announced. “The young clerk who ushered you into this office is my son David. My daughter, Melissa, is away at school right now, she'll be back here working with us soon. We have a part-time teller, a close friend of David's, she is here today.” He smiled disarmingly, “My wife and I are the janitors.”

For reasons he could not fathom, Preston felt drawn to the cordial business man. “Have you been in Way-cross long, Mr O'Malley?” he asked, desperately hoping the reply would be more than two or three years.

“Most of two decades, almost as long as the town itself. My wife's family were among the first pioneers in the district.”

“Anyone ever offer to buy you out?” Preston asked innocently.

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Patrick O'Malley laughed, "Not that I heard. An offer may have been made, if so, it fell on deaf ears."

Dismissing the personal questions, the bank owner switched the topic to Diamond's intentions. "What brings *you* to Way-cross? Have you spent a good deal of time investigating opportunities here?"

"This is my first stop. I figure if the bank can point me in the right direction, why seek elsewhere?"

O'Malley acknowledged with a slight nod. "You may have chosen an excellent location if you have an eye turned toward the future. The town doesn't exactly radiate prosperity but if you look close, there is potential; there is a lot of potential for this little burg. We have a good water supply, we have the stage and we are the end of the line for Union Pacific on this spur. Mark my words: Someday this town will be a city!"

Diamond appreciated and encouraged the banker's enthusiasm. "You know, I'd like to buy a small piece of ground... A little spread quite close to town... Maybe a property that could someday be incorporated into the..." He smiled faintly, "the city."

"Moody Dexter!" The banker blurted.

"The sheriff?" Preston's face reflected confusion.

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“Yes! Yes! The sheriff is thinking of selling his place because his wife is going blind. No doubt another reason is that Moody is growing too large to handle the chores. But his excuse is that he needs to be able to check on her during the day while he is at his sheriff duties.”

O'Malley eagerly pitched the sheriff's property while Diamond offered enough queries to intimate an honest interest. The discussion soon reached a conclusion with the new-comer agreeing to have a look at the Dexter spread.

Back outside on the boardwalk, Preston looked up and down the main thoroughfare. An increase in traffic, several farm wagons and a canopied buggy were keeping the dust stirred up today. Maybe the bank man had been right: Way-cross will someday be a thriving city.

Diamond subconsciously observed the street activity while considering the conundrum: Why had the Way-cross Bank been spared any take-over attempt? Geographically the town was situated roughly near the centre of the area concerned in Preston's investigation. The fine thread of evidence he followed along the investigative trail had certainly led to this town; Death had sat in ambush awaiting his arrival. So, if a headquarters or ring-leader for the operation had been established in Way-cross, why had this bank not been among the first to be absorbed? Could the



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conspiracy have deliberately omitted Way-cross from its list so as to throw a possible tracker off the scent? Was Patrick O'Malley involved? Maybe the Way-cross banker had master-minded the entire operation. Preston shook his head, disbelieving this last thought.

News and rumour, unless embellished with death and gore, travelled slowly in the territory. Folks were not well enough attuned to piece together fragments in order to sensationalize hearsay. Only a concentrated effort on Diamond's part had exposed the overwhelming evidence that a massive campaign to absorb the majority of the more modest financial institutions within a growing radius was in progress. Possibly, no one else even suspected a correlation between recent area ownership changes in the industry. Of a certainty, the orchestrator of the scheme now held title and ownership to a substantial and dynamic range of properties and investments. Like an avalanche, the scheme could easily snowball, eventually swallowing up the instigators. Preston Diamond hoped to be present when that happened.

As usual, business ran between furiously treading water and drowning at Sam's Sewing Shop. Along with regular stitching, alterations and sales duties, two weddings were scheduled in the near future; Samantha and Matilda were severely

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taxed to have the beautiful gowns and colourful dresses ready on time. This day, Samantha's work suffered from lack of concentration. Every time she glanced toward the street outside, her gaze halted at the beautifully sculptured window. The window led to thoughts of the quiet handsome man responsible for its construction. "He's a gunman! A killer!" she told herself, and then: "He was only protecting himself... and Dad.. he saved Dad's life!"

"He's arrogant... He's so good-looking."

An argument inside one's own head can have many avenues of approach, none of retreat. Thoughts generated in this circumstance do not seek an escape, they just bounce around one's mind changing shape, taking on new form and generally driving a person to the brink... In frustration, Samantha angrily threw down the pattern she had been trying unsuccessfully to attach to a cotton print. Facing Matilda she said slowly, "I have to go out for a short walk... I can not concentrate."

The older woman, expressionless, nodded that she understood and continued her sewing.

Samantha stepped through her shop entrance doorway nearly colliding with Bradley McBain as he strolled along the boardwalk.

"How about coffee then?" he asked as if their conversation of the morning had not ended.

"Yes."

## *Chapter 7*

From Patrick O'Malley, Diamond had obtained directions to the Dexter outfit. From the livery stable, he had purchased a fresh horse. From the hotel he retrieved his rig and saddled the new mount he had ridden bare-back to his lodging. While astride the unfamiliar animal the short distance from the barn to the hotel Preston thought about his recently deceased gelding. Without a saddle, that miserable brute would have pitched him three times by now. Maybe this mount would serve him better; Ol' Ross, the hostler, had vowed the young sorrel was well broke, possessed an even gait and was durable as a mule. Preston didn't even chew, much less swallow, anything fed him by a horse trader.

The new mount performed well although, having been a rental horse for a short while, it felt obligated to test the new owner. The animal soon sensed who had command, accepted the situation and settled down to the work at hand.

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Dexter's ranch lay nestled in a grove of tall cottonwoods along the creek, perhaps three quarters of a mile as the raven flies, up-stream from Way-cross. The banker said Moody ran about thirty head of "white-faced" cows. It was the cattle that caught Diamond's attention first. This "white-faced" herd showed signs of a very particular breeding program. "Hereford," Preston said aloud. Working as a *keniño*, a cow hand on Captain Richard King's ranch in Texas, Diamond handled some of the first Hereford cattle in America. Dexter moved up a notch in Diamond's esteem.

The outbuildings and ranch house came into view as Preston trotted the sorrel along a rutted wagon trail winding between the sprawling cottonwoods. Reining in the mount, Diamond sized up the outfit: Near to him, the slab-board barn and corrals stood in good repair; the yard neat and orderly. The barn, about sixty feet in length, had a loft, the door of which stood open revealing a green stack of cured hay inside. The row of windows along the facing side all had their panes in place. On the off side, a lean-to had been built of the same slab-board construction. Several smaller sorting corrals, a windmill and water trough completed the barn area. Two large-uddered milk cows chewed their cuds and eyed the intruder with casual disinterest. Several red hens and a rooster of various colour scratched the dirt near the corral;

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frequently one of them would strut away from the flock in pursuit of an errant grasshopper or bug. A grunt followed by a short squeal suggested Dexter had a few pigs nearby.

A shed less than half the size of the barn stood about fifty yards to the left. A sooty chimney pipe protruded from the roof giving Preston to believe it may be a blacksmith shop. In a shaded area set back in the trees he recognized the ubiquitous outhouse painted dark green with a quarter moon carved in the door. Diamond deliberately saved scrutiny of the main house until last. It was a small but very well cared for log structure, probably hewn from pines in the forest Preston had passed through just before his encounter with the Lester brothers. A short veranda graced the front of the building. Two four-paned windows were framed adjacent to and on either side of the doorway. Smoke idly trailed upward from a stove pipe chimney; Mrs. Dexter must be baking. On the near side of the home stood a big stone chimney, no smoke issued from it on this warm day. The place manifested a strange, unfamiliar feeling of loneliness in Preston's breast. The Way-cross sheriff had something Preston Diamond would never have.

He spoke softly to the gelding, "Moody Dexter may be over-weight but he certainly isn't lazy."

Diamond did not enquire as to purchase nor mention the ranch visit to Sheriff Dexter. When he had gone to interrogate the banker, the search for real-estate had merely been a ruse, another of the many falsities, pretences and charades Preston incorporated into his investigations. Curiosity, fuelled by a growing interest in Samantha Dexter had driven him to seek out the little cattle operation. Moody Dexter's neat and homey spread had taken Diamond quite by surprise. Now an uneasiness besieged him. Questions, thoughts foreign, flitted through his mind. Perhaps he could put down roots? Find a wife... Raise a family... These dreams, these fantasies, these doors had been closed to him, or so he thought, forever. The pretty dark-haired lass whose picture adorned the inside of his gold watch cover and a very large part of Preston Diamond's heart were buried beneath a slab of cold, sculpted marble in a cemetery near the Whitehouse in Washington D.C. Without love, without a heart to find love again, Preston had found solace in walking the razor's edge.

Since his twentieth year Preston had known no other way of life. The President's man: Emissary? Trouble shooter? Hunter? Killer? Dick? Gunman? What ever the classification, he was always alone.

And so he had preferred it.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Though the silent stranger could attach neither name nor description to his occupation he acknowledged one fundamental aspect: The position required infinite patience; days, weeks, even months on certain difficult cases. Assuming a character role, Diamond could almost forget who he really was. Stagnating in a hellhole, betting his life on a river-boat loaded with cut-throat wastes of humanity who cared no more for their own lives than those of anyone else, riding herd on wild cattle driven by equally wild men, working the dangerous back streets infiltrating murderous gangs, or worse: the brutal, calculating, manipulating lords of the upper echelon in a big city. No one knew how long an assignment may last, no one knew where or what Preston Diamond or one of his aliases may be doing at any particular interval. Time went by, patience was tried and every moment Preston Diamond risked the life he could not call his own.

And danger lurked here in Way-cross; any moment may present that bullet shattering the hour-glass that contained the sands of his fragile existence. How could he consider buying a place of his own? Settling down? Why did he *want* the banker O'Malley to be innocent? Preston could neither understand nor suppress these feelings so out of character. Samantha Dexter was the most attractive, mind messing lady he had ever seen; but

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there had been many lovely ladies along his lonely trails and none had ever reached him. Was she different? Would Samantha Dexter be the fatal error in his judgement?

Satisfied with his brief foray to the outskirts of town, Diamond returned his new gelding to Ol' Ross saying the mount had proven up admirably. The hostler grinned through brown and broken teeth then shot a stream of tobacco juice at a feed bucket, "Well, I tol' ya, I wasn't a gonna lie to ya. He's a good'un."

Removing his rig, Preston grinned inwardly; No doubt, from Ol' Ross's point of view, the price had been "a good'un" too!

Preston accepted an offer from Carver Ward to join him and his wife, Emily, for supper in the hotel dining room. Mrs. Ward, a handsome woman having the healthy tanned complexion of one who is not afraid to be outdoors, spoke very little though her quiet replies were polite. The conversation centred around cattle, grass and livestock prices and Diamond appreciated that the rancher did not ask why or how long he might be in Way-cross. Preston mentioned the small bunch of Herefords pastured near town. The rancher commended



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Dexter's foresight expounding upon the benefits of the recently introduced breed. Ward had purchased two yearling bulls from Moody Dexter and hoped to see herd improvement with next year's calf crop.

Upon arriving at his hotel room later, Diamond immediately noticed the tiny tattle-tale strand had disappeared from the doorway. Snapping his fingers as though he had suddenly remembered something, Preston said, "Oh damn!" loud enough to be heard inside the room then turned and strode purposefully down the hall to descend the stair. He gave the intruder plenty of time to escape should he be in the room. Returning about twenty minutes later, Colt in hand Preston edged silently along the hallway, taking precautions against casting shadows under his door. Noiselessly he turned the key then burst through the door, leaping to the side so as not to be framed by light spilling in from the hallway. He landed in a low crouch, the dark ominous bore of his pistol, like a malevolent eye, searching the room.

Vacant.

A faint... a fragrance, perhaps, lingered above the familiar kerosene odour. He lit the lamp on the near chest of drawers, closed the door and surveyed the room. The trunk had been tampered with but the searcher had not been able to open the chest. Diamond sniffed the water in the pitcher on the washstand. Though he detected nothing he

*C. C. Phillips*

made a mental note to have Frank Collier, the desk clerk, replace it. Again he tested the air: A lady's perfume. Perhaps the chambermaid had returned though the tenant had specified "no admittance" to the hotel clerk after the room had been made up. Diamond had been present when the maid arrived to tidy the room; he recalled no strong scent of perfume accompanied her. This fragrance must be more recent. And, it was of high quality. Someone, a female, must be interested in him or his luggage. He reattached the near invisible strand that had been dislodged from the trunk.

Boots off, gun-belt removed, Preston stretched out fully clothed on the bed. He leaned over, blew out the lamp and immediately drifted off in tranquil sleep.

Across the street, the soft flickering of the coal oil lantern caused Ole Evenson to glance up from the book he was reading. He stood up, stretched and adjusted the wick on the lantern reminding himself to add some oil to the light next day. Quietly the old Norwegian opened the door to the double cell room and made his way in the familiar darkness to the rear exit. Pale light from outside framed the barred window but failed to penetrate the room. The faint trace of a breeze indicated the window had been raised to let in the night air. The place smelled strongly of lye soap, a

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

by-product of the cleaning up of Lester's mess. Soft snores issued from the prisoner though he stirred in his sleep when the night man slipped by. Ole stepped into the cool quiet evening. He gazed up at the inverted ocean of the Milky Way as he relieved himself in the dust of the back alley. The Norwegian thought of the old country and wondered if his parents who had passed away so long ago would be there among the constellations tonight. A faint musical jingle caught his attention just an instant before a sharp pain on the top of his bare head caused the heavenly display to explode in a thousand dazzling shooting stars; quickly light switched to black as he sank to his knees, toppling over in the dirt.

Preston Diamond passed from sleep to alert in a split second. His lifestyle didn't allow for groggy interlude. Without relighting the lamp he strapped on the .45, then collected the light coat he had set aside before his nap. No one observed the silent exit from the rear of the hotel; another shadow lost in the crowd. From a saloon several doors down the street from the hotel, boisterous laughter accompanied the tinny sound of a cheap piano flogged by a novice. Preston ignored the noise and tuned in to the suspicious. He sought anomalies: A discreet assembly at a closed curtained residence, saddled horses tethered in the

*C. C. Phillips*

darkness, whispered conversations along the alleys. Most often nothing became of these night time forays. Occasionally something did. Preston operated on the principal that answers were not to be found, nor would they come to him, in his bedroom.

This evening Diamond chose to work the far side of the main street. He paused as a horse and rider trotted by, then faded across the dimly lit avenue. Away from the piano's abuse he detected the distant diminishing thud of more than one, likely two, sets of hooves as someone rode away at a rapid pace. The saloon was busy tonight.

Using the alleys and unlit side streets Preston wandered about the sleeping town. He considered: Way-cross would require a huge population growth to achieve city status; Banker Patrick O'Malley's optimism may outlive him. A lantern burned above the opened double doors of the livery. Preston slipped inside the barn avoiding being silhouetted in the doorway. Ol' Ross's snores were loud enough to keep the horses awake. Preston briefly checked over the animals. None were lathered or showed signs of a long ride recently. Seven horses were tied short in the rows of stalls along each side of the barn's alley-way.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

His own newly acquired mount stood farther along the line, untethered in a box stall. Preston fed him a handful of oats, then quietly disappeared through the smaller rear doorway.

Normality ruled all of Way-cross tonight.

Gliding along the alley which ran west from the livery stable, Preston took extra time to study the rear of the bank. Again he wondered why this institution had been spared a take-over interest.

A faint but distinct groan interrupted his thoughts. Straining to hear more he eased softly along in the direction from which the sound had emanated. Behind the sheriff's office, he paused a long time. An owl hooted from somewhere farther back and higher up, probably the roof of the livery stable; a dog barked. Even as Preston's eyes registered the darker shadow of a human body stretched out on the ground, Ole Evenson groaned again. The Colt leaped into Diamond's hand as he jumped over the inert form making a dash for the rear entrance of the jail house. The door stood ajar. Quickly he searched the cell block, stepped into the office, pistol at the ready.

Deserted.

Kenny Lester had broke jail. Or more accurately, someone had sprung him free.

Preston hoisted the lantern from its hook and sprinted back out to where Ole had now pulled himself into a sitting position.

*C. C. Phillips*

“Ja, some son-of-a-gun bugger clobbered me on t' noggin.” He groaned.

Blood had trickled down the jailer's face making the injury look far more severe than actual. Preston inspected the damage. A wicked swollen goose egg and thin evil slice in the scalp where Ole's hair was the thinnest indicated the source of the blood. Probably the assailant had clouted the night watchman with a gun barrel. The wound had stopped bleeding, crusted particles told Preston the job had been done more than a few minutes ago. He recalled the thud of rapid hooves when first he had began his midnight foray.

With Diamond's assistance Ole struggled to his feet. Leaning against the younger man the Norwegian awkwardly shuffled into the office. Preston seated the injured old timer in his chair then offered to fetch the doctor. Ole declined medical assistance. “Ja he'll yust say, “you got a bump on your noggin”, no use to wake him up at this time of the night for Ole.” The jailer pointed to a drawer in the sheriff's big oak desk. Though it was closer to him than Preston, Ole said, “Maybe some medicine in there...”

Diamond opened the drawer, retrieved a half bottle of brandy then poured a shot in a less than spotless coffee mug. Ole accepted the drink gripping the cup with both hands. “Ja, better have

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

one yourself.” An aborted attempt at a smile turned into a wince; both were less than glamorous through the blood stained trail across his pale and wrinkled face.

Preston poured a short shot in the other dirty mug he located amid the clutter of the desk top. “Skål.”





## *Chapter 8*

Next morning, it was Preston Diamond, alias Bradley McBain, who intercepted Sheriff Dexter on the street en route to his office. Samantha, who accompanied her father, gasped, raising a hand to her mouth when she heard the news. “How is Uncle Ole?” she asked anxiously before Dexter could start his inquisition.

“He'll have a sore head for a few days,” McBain allowed. “The wound wasn't too serious after we washed the blood away. Mr. Evenson didn't wish to bother the doctor so I helped him home then stayed in case signs of a concussion or internal damage appeared. He fell asleep and I administered a few cold cloths in effort to reduce the swelling. He was still sleeping when I left about an hour ago.”

Samantha interrupted her father's attempt to speak, “A long night for you, Mr. McBain.”

“Ole is your uncle?”

*C. C. Phillips*

Dexter broke in impatiently, "He's been around so long we consider the old bugger part of the family." While he held the conversation, he continued, "Did Ole have any idea who pistol whipped him? Did he see anybody? How many were there?"

The trio continued down the street, McBain answering the questions as they walked.

Samantha cut across to her shop when the sheriff reached his office. McBain followed him inside then confided. "Ole thought he heard a metallic jingle just before he received the crack on his skull. It may have been the ring of a rowel or some jingle-bobs." He added, "I couldn't say what kind of fool would leave his spurs on while attempting to sneak around someone."

Dexter studied McBain suspiciously, "You know damn well what kind of fool would do that... You booted him through Sam's shop window yesterday."

The younger man grinned what he hoped would appear as sheepishly, "The fellow you called Muley had crossed my mind. In preparation for his first wind up and swing he told me the Lesters were friends of his."

Moody Dexter shook his head, "No matter what happens around here lately, you show up right in the thick of things."

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

If innuendo existed, McBain shrugged it off. “Earlier on, before I found Ole, I heard some horses, more than one, galloping off west. It could have been Kenny Lester and his accomplice.”

“That reminds me,” the sheriff expostulated, “What the hell were you up to, skulking around the streets of Way-cross in the middle of the night?”

“Couldn’t sleep, so I decided to go for a stroll.”

Dexter snorted but didn’t press the issue. “Now I gotta round up another goddamn posse and make a show of finding those two renegades. My hip ain’t up to a lot of hard ridin’ neither.”

“No need for the posse, Sheriff, they’ll be back before too long.”

Dexter waited for the younger man to go on, but when nothing further developed he growled, “Well... What makes you so goddamn certain about that?”

McBain took his time in answering. “Among other things... Kenny Lester swore to escort me to hell for killing his brothers.”

“Bah! Idle threat. The young bugger has cleared right out of the territory. And I say, “Good riddance. Saves the circuit judge his trouble.”

Bradley McBain insisted, “He’ll be back in Way-cross very soon and I’ll be the bait.”

*C. C. Phillips*

Dexter shrugged, “Well I'm going over to the depot to send a telegram. It's my bet this town won't see Kenny Lester ever again so I don't want that judge coming here for nothing.”

Preston Diamond knew what lay in store regardless of the irascible Moody Dexter's insistence. He purposely suggested that Larson would be coming for him so as to mitigate Sheriff Dexter's inquires later.

If he survived.

Routine, a luxury Preston Diamond and most of his aliases avoided could easily manifest itself in Way-cross. Preston deliberately began to modify his public activities; patterns can be unhealthy for people in his profession. In the privacy of his room however, he maintained a ritual as certain as morning ablutions: a full hour dedicated to solitary 'hand' combat practise. This exercise, like a fanatical religious devotee, he performed whenever anything less than extreme circumstances permitted; indoors, outdoors, heedless of weather conditions the training he had acquired in his youth, from the teachings of an elderly Chinese master, were rehearsed over and over again always striving for the impossible: perfection.

Though he chose a different approach and time for the meal, Preston stubbornly continued to

breakfast at May-Anne's eatery where the surly waitress invariably declined a gratuity. Preston found the pretty girl amusing though she offered only the very basics of service, no smile, barely acknowledging his presence. Her demeanour among other customers verged on, for the creative imagination, affable. Now, the morning after Ole Evenson's knock on the head, Diamond detected a more pleasant air when his meal arrived. He looked up into the fathomless eyes of the waitress but she yielded no clues as to why he should sense a difference. "Strange lady," he opined.

Frank Collier appeared a touch on the weary side when Preston returned to the hotel. The effervescence usually displayed barely surfaced. "Good morning, Mr. McBain!" the clerk called as Preston strode through the lobby.

"Hello Frank, have you been behind that desk for two days straight? You always seem to be here."

With private amusement, Preston watched the out of control Adam's apple frantically seeking an escape either up or down. "Well Mr. McBain, I have enjoyed a very long shift this time and my relief appears to be later than usual today..." He failed to stifle an errant yawn, "Looks like you may have a chance to meet Governor Rittinger after all."

Preston smiled over his shoulder as he started up the stair, "I'll look forward to it."

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In his room, Diamond quickly unlocked the trunk and extracted the brass telescope. This he tucked inside his coat then closed and sealed the chest. Stepping out into the empty hall, he sealed the door to his room then took the stair back down to the lobby. Frank Collier's cross-shift had arrived, Frank's Adam's apple pelted out an up-date of the evenings activities. Neither clerk took notice as Preston slipped by.

Entering the livery stable Preston observed that Ol' Ross had apparently enjoyed more sleep than Frank Collier. The ageing hostler was patiently explaining to a pimply-faced, tow-headed lad, the proper way to fork manure. Diamond had seen the kid about town, always staring in wide-eyed awe when Preston passed near. Undoubtedly the boy had heard the exaggerated tales of McBain's pistol prowess. An honest fellow would not wish to encourage a youngster in that endeavour.

The pair hadn't noticed his approach. McBain eased into their line of sight, nodded to the kid, sending his face into an acne enhanced contortion of gaping and gawking. "Morning, Ross." he said to the hostler.

"Ah! it's Bradley McBlaine... come to ride that prime piece of horse flesh I sold you, no

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doubt?" To the stable hand he said, "Fetch Mr. McBlaine's gelding, Lonny." The boy demonstrated far more enthusiasm for this chore than forking road apples.

"Indeed, I am here for my pony, but what makes you so certain?"

The hostler grinned advertising a complete lack of dental hygiene then fired another accurate brown stream at the feed bucket. "I can al'us tell when a feller plans to go for a ride. He carries hisself a certain way, sort of 'poligizin' to his feet they won't have to take him far."

The boy came forward leading the gelding. "You want," he gulped, "you want I should saddle him for you, Mr. McBlaine?"

Preston sighed, "*McBain*. No, thanks Lonny, I'll throw the rig on him this morning."

Ol' Ross levelled another squirt of tobacco juice, "A man like Mr. McBlaine, here, Lonny," he explained, "he don't hold with other folks saddlin' nor straddlin' his horse."

Preston broke in, effectively warding off a soliloquy, "Would you mind holding the reins while I set my rig on, Lonny?"

"You bet *Mr. McBain!*"

Diamond slipped the boy a nickel then led the horse out into the sunlight.

*C. C. Phillips*

“I gave him a real good drink this morning, Mr. McBain,” the stable hand called. “He sure was thirsty.”

Swinging into the saddle, he said, “Thanks, Lonny,” and rode east out of Way-cross.

The sound of running hooves Preston heard during the night had headed west from the town. Suspecting the horses were ridden by Kenny Lester and his accomplice, Diamond intended to eventually point his horse in that direction too, but did not wish to announce his plans to anyone who may be watching. He rode past Dexter's place and eyed with favour the white faced bunch grazing in their pasture. Slipping into the cottonwoods he put Way-cross far enough behind him to enable a double-back along the north side without being observed from town. Diamond dismounted, removed the telescope from his pocket, and studied his back-trail. The cottonwood trees were sufficiently sparse that, if he knelt down below the level of dense foliage, he could detect movement among the trees. No tell-tale horse legs appeared in his vision. Mounting the gelding again he rode on, confident in the certainty no one had followed.

Eventually Preston's route brought him to the wagon road he and Carver Ward had taken to retrieve the corpses of the Lester brothers. There were plenty of shod horse tracks along the trail. Preston's plan did not involve tracking down the



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escaped prisoner so he only casually studied the various prints. What he wanted he soon found: A high knoll that would serve his purpose as a lookout point. From here he would scan the distance across the flat land, up the barren grass rise all the way to the pine tree ridge high up on the horizon. At the foot of the hill a copse of aspen served as tether and concealment for the gelding. The rider slipped the bridal and loosened the cinches. Telescope and canteen in hand Diamond angled up the slope afoot. A mule deer, startled at the intrusion, snorted a complaint then bounded away to disappear around the far edge of the hill.

“Perfect,” Preston breathed when he discovered the bed of the buck. The animal had chosen a hollowed out area in a patch of light brush more than three quarters of the distance to the hilltop. As it had for the deer, the position provided Diamond with a backdrop to obscure his presence and a panoramic foreground to keep watch upon. Slinging the canteen on the grass, Diamond sank into the recently occupied bed, prepared for a long sojourn.

Flies buzzed, little birds made little bird sounds among the scrub, the sun shone. Preston soaked up the warmth, dozed off from time to time and, through the telescope, kept a vigil.

A wagon, heavily loaded, drawn by four horses, proceeded west along the road Preston had

*C. C. Phillips*

abandoned to reach the hillside he now occupied. A pair of riders, cowboys heading to town, held his attention briefly; they weren't the pair he sought. The in-bound, then out-bound stages came and went. Through the eye of the powerful optic Preston observed portions of the faint fire trail he had taken from the pine ridge to the wagon road. Though he could not distinguish the exact location, several turkey vultures, flapping skyward or plummeting down, marked the position of his deceased horse. Within view, roughly a hundred head of cattle contentedly grazed the green prairie grass.

High noon slid by; afternoon baulked, as was its wont this time of year, hoarding more than its share of sunshine; disinclined to relinquish the reins to evening. Preston waited. The great orange ball doggedly crept toward the western horizon. Finally the last flare of sunset, that closing burst that suddenly floods the land turning golden everything in its wake, had only a few seconds grace when the telescope produced a pair of riders just on the near edge of the pines; they were heading in this direction. The brilliant light faded, the image lost resolution.

In the brief instant available Preston observed that one rider was a large heavy-set man

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the other slight but nearly as tall. The distance was too great for positive distinguishing features, but no doubt existed for Preston Diamond: Muley and Kenny Lester.

Diamond had felt absolutely positive the outlawed pair would return. He didn't wish to bet his life on it and that is why he dedicated this entire day to proving himself right.

In the gathering dusk Preston strolled leisurely down the slope to his tethered horse. Here he discovered that this animal, though well broke to saddle, displayed a serious aversion to the halter. Through experience Preston had learned to tie his horse both short and high. Don't allow sufficient lead for the clumsy buggers to tangle themselves in the tether. The adage holds true, "Give 'em enough rope, they'll hang themselves." The gelding didn't hang himself but he had worked his way around the sturdy tree so snugly he inhaled bark with every breath. His forefeet had delivered a brutal punishment upon the aspen and near turf; the hind legs had demolished all within radius. Half the grove lay pounded to pulp, churned to dehydrated mush. If the animal had been frantic, he had worn himself down to a quietude unfamiliar this side of his foaling.

Preston, speaking soothingly to the gelding, drew a razor sharp knife, quickly severing the twisted, knotted halter shank. The horse

*C. C. Phillips*

momentarily sank to its bruised front knees, grateful for the release. Diamond wondered if the mount had been attacked by deerflies or horseflies, though it seemed unlikely, for only blue-bottles had buzzed around Preston where he spent the day higher up the slope. He checked for tell-tale welts from bites of the vicious winged demons. The horse bore no evidence of an insect attack, nor did it appear to have suffered serious self-inflicted abuse.

“Well, I suppose you have a dislike to tethering. No doubt that is why Ol’ Ross locks you up in a box stall.” Preston grinned to himself when he thought of being trimmed by the hostler. “That crooked old hoss-trader took me on that count, but I’ll bet you are completely halter broke now.”

Deepening dusk provided cover as Diamond, leading his horse, back-tracked to the wagon road halting a hundred yards short. This part would be particularly delicate: Preston intended to allow the in-bound riders to pass by, then follow at a distance. He knew it would be a simpler task to dog their heels undetected than to have waited in town all day hoping to locate the miscreants within the confines of the village, where they, so Preston believed, would also be hunting

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

him. To accomplish this he first had to be near enough to hear their passing. Success hinged on the reaction of the horses when they sensed each other, as surely they would.

Diamond's horse heard the riders first and Preston gently clapped a hand on its muzzle. Ears forward, eyes staring intensely into the gloom, the gelding danced and fidgeted but did not whinny or snort. In the intense stillness, Preston could now hear the steady clop of the advancing hooves, the occasional word exchanged between the men.

A shrill neigh burst upon the night. Preston clamped a more firm grip on the muzzle of his horse. "What the hell?" someone cursed. It sounded like the high voice of Kenny Lester. There were sounds of a brief struggle between horse and rider, followed by another curse in a deeper tone, "It's that goddamn mare of yours. She's in season; be'n actin' up all day."

The minor altercation resolved, the ride continued. Preston waited a few moments before releasing the nose of his gelding, then swung into the saddle.

Trailing dangerous murderers, suspects or fugitives on foot, on horse-back, day or night, pleasant or inclement weather conditions, Preston Diamond had experienced many diverse situations

*C. C. Phillips*

in his business. Tonight's task proved painless and uncomplicated. These fellows were obviously quite novice, they did not suspect anyone could be following them.

The distance to Way-cross was not great. Preston correctly assumed the riders would not continue directly into the town. Kenny Lester could not afford to be seen. They veered right, off the wagon road, about a quarter mile from the edge of Way-cross. Reining in under a cottonwood, Diamond slipped from the saddle, quickly stifling the gelding's urge to announce his presence. With his ears Preston followed the progress of Kenny Lester and Muley. The pair had not gone far when sounds of dismounting drifted on the night's stillness. A horse, probably Lester's mare, neighed loudly. A curse, a muffled thud followed by another short ruckus gave Preston to believe the pony had shied or reared after receiving a fist to the muzzle. The horses settled down. Preston heard low voices above the jingle of Muley's gaudy rowels as the cowboys, now afoot, made their way toward the lights of main street. He hoped the steady metallic ring from the spurs would drown out the quiet footfalls of his horse as he led the gelding in stealthy pursuit. Just before lantern light illumed them, the pair stopped for a quiet parley. Preston edged close enough to hear the voices

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clearly. He knew their eyes, growing accustomed to the street lighting ahead, would not be able to penetrate the deeper darkness where Preston and his horse stood eaves-dropping.

“...besides nobody suspects me of springin' you out of the calaboose, I can go anywhere I want in Way-cross. You're the wanted man, not me...”

Lester's higher voice broke in, “Well, we got us a touchy job to do and it ain't gonna be any the easier with you half full of whiskey.”

A snort of laughter followed. “Hell, Kenny, I'm on'y gonna have a little to wet my whistle. If it makes you feel any the better, I'll bring along a pint when I come back.”

Lester acquiesced, “All right; I'm goin' to see Barbara and tell her what's goin' on. You meet me at Joe's old shack... better give me an hour or so in case Barb's in a good mood.”

Another derisive snort from the idiot Muley. “Well, if she's in a good enough mood you give her one for me too!”

The men separated, Lester taking a foot path to the left and Muley strolling, spurs ajingle down the main street. Preston waited until the pair were well away before leading his horse along another trail to the right. He mused, “How thoughtful of Lester to provide such detailed information.” All he needed now was a map to Joe's old shack.

*C. C. Phillips*

The 'map' showed up about three minutes later.



## *Chapter 9*

The logical thing to do would be to have Sheriff Dexter on hand for what Diamond felt certain the, “We got a job to do,” Kenny Lester spoke of might entail. After all, Way-cross was Dexter’s town.

Preston had stuck one foot in the stirrup, preparing to mount when a voice that broke from low to high mid-sentence hailed from across the street, “Hi, Mr. McBain! Going for another ride or are you heading to the livery?” Reversing the decision, Preston stepped back on to the street.

“Evening, Lonny, what keeps you up this late at night?”

The lad trotted over to where Preston and his gelding stood, “Oh, just nothin’. Had to get out of the house...”

“Lonny, do you know a lady named Barbara who lives here in Way-cross?”

“Yessir! Mr. McBain, we got two Barbaras. Which one do you want?”

*C. C. Phillips*

Preston rubbed his chin in thought, keeping the conversation casual, hiding the urgency he felt. “Well, I’m not sure... This Barbara is probably young...”

“Barbara Colter is an old lady, probably thirty or more. The one your lookin’ for must be Barbara Kirwin, she works at May-Anne’s.”

Preston instantly recalled the waitress; her unsolicited animosity toward him now had a foundation. Barbara Kirwin, sweet on young Lester, would understandably despise the man who killed Kenny’s brothers. She must have already known about the jail break this morning because her manner had marginally improved. “Can you tell me where she lives, Lonny?”

“Oh, yeah, I used to play with their dog all the time when I was a kid.” He pointed in a north-easterly direction, “It’s a little white house over there.”

Rural and small town directions; there were probably half a dozen little white houses “over there.” Preston grinned. “Perhaps a touch more specific, Lonny, I’m new to Way-cross.”

Lonny rubbed his chin as he’d seen McBain do. “Well,” he said, “there’s a porch on the front with one of those swing things that people sits on in

the evening. They got a fence with a gate in front. In the back there's a big garden where I sometimes..." He caught himself. "There's a big garden in the back..."

"That should be sufficient, Lonny. I'll be able to find that house... now, how about a place called Joe's old shack?"

"Joe's old shack is the last place on that same street as the Kirwin's, the one farthest east. There's a barn behind it... but it's an empty house, you won't find nobody there."

"I might need to go there later."

Lonny shrugged in a 'suit yourself' manner.

Preston leaned closer to the lad, lowered his voice, and said in a conspiratorial hush, "Lonny, I need your help."

The boy straightened, staring eagerly into McBain's eyes, "What is it, Mr. McBain?" he whispered, trying unsuccessfully to keep his voice from cracking.

"Do you know where Sheriff Dexter's spread is?"

"Sure, I help him with his Hairy Fords sometimes."

"Could you ride my horse out there right now and fetch the sheriff?"

"Mr. McBain! You want me to straddle *your* bronc?" Lonny asked incredulously.

*C. C. Phillips*

“I can trust you, Lonny. It wouldn't do to ask just anybody...”

“You bet, Mr. McBain!” Lonny accepted the reins, valiantly suppressing his excitement.

“I'll meet you both at the livery. Wait for me there. Tell Moody it is very, very urgent.”

McBain watched the lad swing easily into the saddle. The stirrups were too long but Lonny sat as though he may have been born there. Realizing the boy lacked nothing for experience, Preston cautioned, “Ride quiet until you are clear of the edge of town, then give him his head. He'll go like the wind if you let him.”

“I'll do it, Mr. McBain. And I'll bring Sheriff Dexter back with me!”

Lonny turned down a side street then disappeared in the total darkness of a back alley. Preston hurried through the shadows, shifting unobserved across the dimly lit main thoroughfare. In the distance he heard the thrum of hoof beats. He grinned; Lonny had put heels to the long-gaited gelding.

Locating the Kirwin home did not entail a lengthy search. A lantern burned above a doorway illuminating the veranda where Preston espied the “swing thing” Lonny had described. It was a low-

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

slung gliding unit suspended on a wooden frame; bench seats faced each other from opposite sides. Two people sat on this porch swing conversing in hushed, angry tones.

Through the pale lamp light Diamond recognized Kenny Lester and the waitress named Barbara.

Recalling Lonny's mention of a dog, Preston tried to balance the scale of extra caution to avoid having his presence announced by the family pet with the desire to overhear the conversation. No lamps illumed this side street so the eavesdropper took advantage of the light from the porch hoping it would impede the vision of anyone attempting to stare beyond its glow. If a dog lay on the veranda, or somewhere nearby, it either did not yet sense the intruder or did not bother to sound an alarm. Preston edged closer, leery of a canine outburst.

His luck held.

“...Barb” Kenny Lester was saying in a pleading tone, “We got us a stake; Muley and I can find a new start somewhere. I want you to come with us.”

“You are wanted by the law! How could you have been so stupid, trying to hold up the freight office?” Barbara Kirwin's voice retained the anger Preston detected before drawing near enough to hear the words.

*C. C. Phillips*

“It wasn't my idea! They was my brothers, Barbara! I had to go along with 'em.”

“You should have been shut of those two ages ago, Kenny. Now you are a branded man.”

“It'll all blow over around here. Folks know I wouldn't do anything that bad, I...”

“But you did do something that bad! And then you broke out of jail!”

“Well, Muley let me out. What was I supposed to do? Stay in that damn cell 'til I rotted? Look, Barb, we got a little chore to take care of tonight... Muley and I got to take care of that McBain fella... By morning we will be gone; you, me and the baby. We'll have...”

“There is no baby,” Barb broke in quietly, a marked tone of sadness trembling in her words.

“What?... What do you mean there ain't no baby? You said we was gonna have a baby...”

“We were... we aren't now... Doc Stohl... he took the baby.”

“Doc Stohl took the baby?” Kenny asked incredulously. “How could he do that?”

“For pity's sake, Kenny! I had an abortion!”

“You killed our baby? You gotta be lyin' to me, Barb! That was my baby too!”

Preston detected the anger rising as the pitch in Lester's voice went higher.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Barbara Kirwin's tone became shrill, defending her own actions by shifting the blame. "You were in jail! How could I know when you were ever coming out? Maybe the judge would have hanged you, for all I knew!"

Kenny Lester leaped to his feet, sanity sinking. "You brainless bitch!" he yelled, "I oughtta kill you, just like you done to my baby!" He reached across the swing and grabbed at the girl but she slid off the end of the seat, came to her feet and rounded on him. In a vicious, throaty purr she growled, "Don't you come near me, Kenny Lester. You get off this porch and out of my sight. I don't ever want to see your face around here again!"

Preston, ready to spring to the girl's defence, relaxed momentarily. Barbara Kirwin could handle herself.

The house door was jerked open. A bare headed, middle-aged man wearing slippers and evening attire angrily stepped onto the veranda. In a level but authoritative tone he said, "That's enough shouting, you two! You'll have the whole town awake and I don't need the publicity." Motioning with his hand he said, "Barbara, you git inside here... Kenny, beat it, before Dexter comes alookin'."

The girl obediently slipped past her father. By the lamplight Preston saw the shine of tears on her cheeks.

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Kenny Lester offered no resistance. Diamond drew himself deeper into the shadow as the harangued young man strode stiffly down the walk. Upon reaching the street, he turned east, away from Preston. Shoulders slumped, the young man shuffled miserably into the darkness.

Diamond waited until Kirwin had re-entered the house before proceeding in Lester's wake. Trailing the fugitive posed no strain; a locomotive could have whistled past without his observation. The rhythmic drum of hoof beats, in all probability Dexter and Lonny hurrying to town, could be heard in the distance by the time Kenny Lester climbed over the broken gate at the derelict shanty previously referred to as Joe's place. No light showed from within; Muley hadn't made the appointment as yet. Kenny Lester, his plans of romance thwarted, had arrived ahead of schedule. Preston considered there would be plenty of time to rendezvous with Dexter.

"I brung him, Mr. McBain!" Lonny pridefully announced when Preston entered the lighted livery stable.

Dexter was edgy as a three square file, "You got a damn good reason for getting' me outta bed, sore hip aplaguin' me, to go gallivantin' off on a midnight ride?"



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Ol' Ross, the hostler, had wakened to the sound of horses being led into the barn. He paused while packing a wad of tobacco in his cheek, "Do ya good to have some late night exercise, Moody."

McBain hedged, "We need to go up to your office, Sheriff."

Turning to Lonny, Preston reached in a pocket and extracted a small leather change purse. He sorted out eight-bits and passed the money to the stable hand, "You did a fine job, Lonny. There is a little extra for you to tend to my horse, if you don't mind."

The lad studied the coins, "A whole dollars worth!" he exclaimed. "That's too much, Mr. McBain."

"I figure you're worth it." Preston said, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Besides, it's late and the horse needs a good going over." Adjusting his keen gaze to the hostler, he added, "He had a bad reaction to the tether this afternoon."

Ol' Ross shrugged, laid out a stream of tobacco, then grinned his innocence.

"Tie him in a stall with a rope behind his ass for tonight," Preston ordered the hostler, then turned back to Dexter. "Sheriff, I have to get in your office. It's a matter of utmost importance."

*C. C. Phillips*

Dexter and McBain started up the street but McBain soon steered the sheriff across the avenue. "Where the hell are you taking me?" Dexter growled. "You're actin' like one of them goddamn Union Pacific Railroad dicks."

"Muley and Lester have returned to town... they are meeting at Joe's shack in a few minutes. The pair of them are up to no good so you best arrest them... before someone takes a bullet."

"Where in hell do you get these hi falutin' notions, McBain? Muley and Kenny wouldn't shoot anybody. They just got tangled up in a little misdemeanor, that's all. Now you're telling me they're a couple of killers."

McBain didn't answer. By now they were close enough to see a pale light, probably a candle, burning through a broken window at the shanty Kenny Lester had entered. Soon they could hear low voices emanating from within. Muley had arrived from the saloon.

Inexplicably and without warning, Moody Dexter felt old; tired and very old. He swallowed audibly and drew the worn out Navy Colt. McBain sensed a tremor run through the sheriff.

"What do you figure is the best way to sort this out?" McBain breathed.

Diamond considered that Moody must have learned to whisper in a packed saloon as the Way-

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

cross sheriff's tobacco-smoke-tempered voice grated on the stillness. "I'll talk to 'em. They'll come out of there, hands in the air." He spoke with more confidence than he possessed.

"You want me to cover the back?" Preston asked.

The sheriff didn't answer, instead he bellowed, "Kenny, Muley, this is Sheriff Dexter... I know you boys are in there... Shuck them pea shooters and come on out here where I can see you."

Preston hoped the hesitant quaver he detected in Moody's voice did not reach the ears of the miscreants.

The candle immediately became extinguished. A short, hushed argument erupted in the shack, then Muley shouted, "Now Moody, we ain't lookin' for no trouble and we don't want you gitten' hurt. But you can't handle the two of us by yourself. Why don't you just let us alone for tonight? Tomorrow we promise to be gone clear out of your bailiwick."

Preston noted Muley's speech held no threat, in fact, it sounded quite congenial. The big cowboy must be one of the few who actually grow mellow with raw whiskey.

"You been in the saloon, Muley," Dexter called back in a friendly tone. "You couldn't shoot your way out of a..."

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“He's keeping you occupied while Lester slips out,” McBain warned in a low voice.

“Kenny, you don't be slipping away! For your information, I ain't alone out here.”

McBain groaned hearing this revelation.

Lester's derangement surfaced in anger as he almost squealed, “You got that bastard McBain out there with you, Dexter?”

Without awaiting response, the incensed jail breaker suddenly erupted through the window hole taking the remainder of the wooden frame and glass with him. He landed on his feet, gun in hand. Before Dexter could aim, Kenny Lester espied a target and commenced firing.

Dexter grunted, his gun going off in the general direction of the assailant. Beside the sheriff another Colt spoke authoritatively.

Once.

Lester took the slug high in the chest on the left side. His body spun in a half circle counter-clockwise. In slow motion he sank to the earth, life's last blood gushing horribly from a ghastly hole in his heart.

Preston swung the Colt toward the shack covering Muley who stumbled through the doorway. He hadn't even drawn his gun. “Don't... Don't sh-sh-shoot... Don't sh-shoot,” he bawled. “I'm coming out. Moody, don't shoot me.”

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Preston glanced quickly at the sheriff. Dexter was down on one knee.

“Drop your goddamn gun and do it slow, Muley,” he commanded.

Muley complied without hesitation, then stepped down off the broken sill. “Gawd, you killed Kenny... He's got a hole clean through. He... he's dead, Moody!”

McBain took a longer look at Dexter. “You okay, Sheriff?” he asked.

“Well, I ain't hit if that's what you're wonderin'... Maybe too much excitement for the old ticker; I may have blacked out for a second or two there. I'm too old and fat for this rowdy pace.”

Preston grinned his relief. “Your pistol is still intact. That's a step up from last time.”

“Good thing the old girl didn't misfire on me now! God, I shot Kenny Lester!”

McBain allowed the inaccuracy should be buried with the deceased. By way of consolation, he intoned, “Looks like he didn't suffer.”

Samantha Dexter could not go back to sleep after Lonny Fischer had woken the household with his wild pounding on the front door. She coaxed the coals in the wood-stove to flame, then heated a

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kettle of water. Her mother joined Samantha when the kettle's whistle announced it had come to a boil. They drank that pot of tea, and had started on the second when Moody entered.

Samantha rushed to her step-father. "Dad, you look pale!"

"I'm all right," Dexter failed nonchalance. He hung his coat and gun belt on a clothes hook near the door then took a chair at the big wooden kitchen table. Edith Dexter reached across to grasp her husband's hand. "You know you cannot keep anything from your girls, Alan, so you may as well tell us what happened."

Samantha selected her father's special mug from a cupboard, poured the tea and placed the cup in front of him. "Want a dash of brandy in there, Dad?" she asked.

Moody nodded miserably, watched as Sam tilted a healthy two fingers in the mug she had only partially filled. His *girls* knew him too well. He took his time rolling a smoke, lit it and blew a cloud up at the ceiling. "I don't know how much of Lonny's spiel you heard when he come abeatin' on the door. Anyway, that stranger in town, McBain, he sent the Fischer kid out here to get me. Turns out, Kenny Lester and Muley had come back to town. McBain thought they was up to no good.

We found 'em holed up in Joe's old shack..." He paused, drank a swig of the stiff tea, took two more long drags from the quirly, shook his head sadly, then continued in a dull monotone.

"I called to the boys, I says, "Throw down your guns and come on out," then, like a damn fool I told 'em I wasn't alone; I thought that would stop any notion of gun play. Young Lester, he guessed that McBlaine was out there with me. He'd swore to kill the man and I guess he meant it. Kenny come abustin' out through a window, gun out, shootin' like you'd think he be'n livin' on loco weed."

Both women gasped but did not interrupt.

Dexter stared at the burning end of his smoke, tears welled in his eyes. "I shot back... I killed Kenny Lester tonight."

The ladies came to comfort him. Each put a reassuring hand on his shoulders. "Dad, it was self defence. You had to shoot back," Samantha pleaded. Mrs. Dexter echoed, "Alan, you are the sheriff. You shot an escaped prisoner whom you were attempting to take into custody. You cannot blame yourself."

Dexter took the soft hands in his rough and calloused grip. "I know that," he said miserably, "but Kenny Lester was just a wild kid. He had his whole life in front of him... now he's gone."

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“What about that silly Muley? Did he come out shooting at you too?” Edith Dexter asked.

“No, Muley gave hisself up without a fight. He was pretty scared seeing young Kenny lyin' there dead like that.”

“Mr. McBain, is... is he all right?” Samantha asked, not bothering to sound unconcerned.

“Yeah. Yeah, he's okay. That man is a survivor. He helped me escort Muley to the hoosegow.”

“Muley is locked up then?” Dexter's wife queried.

“Ole is keeping an eye on him tonight. An odd thing though: when we reached the office, McBain told me to have Muley turn out his pockets. Muley never had enough coin on him to buy his own whiskey, but tonight he had five Double Eagles. A hundred dollars! Where would a guy like Muley Trippett find that kind of money?”



## *Chapter 10*

Way-cross's Grand Hotel did not scrimp on guest comfort. Preston's bed enveloped his tired body in luxurious embrace. The window had been left closed in anticipation of shutting out disturbance from next morning's street activity. Consecutive late night forays, coupled with long days were having their toll on the investigator. Rest when you can: tomorrow Diamond would sleep in...

“McBlaine! McBlaine! This is Sheriff Dexter, open up this goddamn door and don't you come a shootin'.”

Preston, instantly awake, glanced through the curtained window. Shadows on the street suggested the sun had a long haul to high noon. He'd slept well, but hadn't slept in.

Dexter hammered on the door again. “McBlaine, you in there?”

Diamond grabbed his pants, slid into them and responded congenially, "Hold on a second Moody, I'm just putting on my trousers." After buckling on his holster, Preston eased open the door. Ignoring the old Navy revolver levelled at his belly, he said, "Didn't you have a late enough night, Sheriff? How come you're up so early harassing hotel guests?"

"I'll take that peashooter, you're under arrest, McBaine," Dexter barked authoritatively.

"*McBain.*" Preston handed him the gun, butt first. "I must have done something criminal in my sleep. You weren't interested in throwing me in jail when we parted company last night."

The sheriff locked eyes with Preston, "Muley Trippett was shot dead in his cell early this morning..."

McBain took the news with only mild surprise. "That doesn't come as a shock to me."

"Certain evidence and a strong hunch make me awfully suspicious of you, McBain. Seems to me you been stirring up a hornet's nest around here... git your duds on and come with me."

"Give me a moment to wash up and use the lavatory, Sheriff. I try to be meticulous in my morning ablutions..."

"I'm not givin' you a moment for nothin'," Dexter protested. "Now throw some boots on and git movin'."

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McBain sighed, walked past the sheriff toward the common washroom, calling over his shoulder, "You'll have to shoot me for resisting arrest, Moody."

Dexter fumed and paced while McBain calmly dressed for the day. The sheriff followed the prisoner down the stair, past an astonished Frank Collier whose eyes grew larger than his Adam's apple; out into the street where a rather large number of people gossiped in hushed whispers, somehow louder than the average shout. They watched in proud admiration as their sheriff marched the gunman to the jail. "Last night Sheriff Dexter killed Kenny Lester in a shoot out. Today, he arrested a vicious, merciless killer who had gunned down young Muley Trippet in cold blood. You know Muley was shot dead through the bars of the window in his jail cell?" McBain could hear what they weren't saying. He sought young Lonny Fischer in their midst, feeling an odd relief that he did not find him.

Once inside his office, tension drained from Moody Dexter like water running down a crack. He preceded, rather than followed, the prisoner into the double cell block. Ole Evenson groaned in rheumatic torment as he stood up from scrubbing the bloodied floor of the room Kenny Lester had

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recently occupied and, more recently, Muley Trippet had been murdered in. "Good morning, McBain," the Norwegian said without a trace of accent.

"God morgen, Ole." Bradley McBain replied, also with no accent.

The strong scent of lye soap from Ole's scrub pail only partially masked a rank, burnt smell. Wisps of feathers clung to the upper corners of the cell. Preston quickly summed up the evidence. "Someone used a feather pillow to muffle the blast of the shot."

Ole stepped out of the cramped quarters, allowing passage for McBain. Dexter stood aside holding the door while the prisoner walked in. The clang of the iron barred gate did not strike that hollow finality for Preston Diamond as it may for most.

"You ought to know about the pillow," Dexter accused. "You done the shootin."

Preston ignored the comment. "Can I have some coffee, maybe a bit of breakfast?"

Dexter only grunted but Ole volunteered, "Ja, McBain, I'll fetch something for you from May Anne's."

The sheriff and jailer exited the cell block leaving McBain alone, behind bars, locked up in the Way-cross jail.

Ole went out to order the meal. Sheriff Dexter took a seat behind his desk, brought out several sheets of paper, whittled a point on a pencil stub and commenced the very laborious task of creating a written report; actually, three reports. The pencil had scratched only a few nearly legible notes when a voice behind Dexter made him jump, spilling lukewarm coffee on his work.

“God, Moody I can't stay locked up in there,” McBain announced.

The lawman did not bother reaching for the heavy Navy revolver he had placed on the desk beside him. He knew McBain sufficiently to recognize the futility in that effort. Staring vacantly straight ahead he groaned, “McBlaine, go back in your goddamn cell and stay there!”

“Sheriff, you haven't even asked for a statement from me,” McBain protested, stepping around the desk. He reached for the second mug, the one that was still upright, and poured vile looking black coffee from an even blacker pot warming on a miniature kerosene stove. “Maybe I have something to add in my own defence.”

“Who in this town, besides you, would have shot Muley?” Dexter asked. “Muley Trippett may not have been the most likeable sap in the neighbourhood, but nobody, *NOBODY*, in Way-cross would have murdered him. Shot him dead, while unarmed, defenceless, caged up with no more

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room than a coyote in a trap. There ain't anyone in my bailiwick that could do a thing like that. And, to my knowledge, there ain't any strangers, excepting you, within miles of here right now. It seems to me somebody has farted in church and is tryin' to blame it on the damn preacher." It was a long speech for Moody Dexter.

Fixing a baleful eye on Bradley McBain, who had taken a seat on one of the three hard wooden chairs in the office, he reached for his makings.

McBain watched the big man twist a quiry. "I bet that cigarette isn't good for your ticker either."

Dexter grunted. "Well, I see you smoking those little cigars all... don't change the subject. What did you want to say in your own defence? If you didn't kill Muley Trippett, who the hell did?"

"Who ever gave Muley those five Double Eagles is the person who shot him," McBain said.

"Well, why did they give him the Double Eagles then?"

"Payment, or partial payment, for a job Muley and Kenny Lester were hired to do."

"That's a hundred dollars, McBain!" the sheriff expostulated. "In a country where a good cowhand might make thirty and found a month, a half-assed puncher like Muley gets paid a hundred? I don't think that happens in Way-cross."

McBain replied levelly, "I didn't say they were hired to punch cows, Moody."

"What other job could either of 'em handle?" the sheriff argued.

The younger man waited until the sheriff had his cigarette burning to his satisfaction before responding. "Remember when I told you Muley and Lester would be back? I said, '*I am the bait.*' Do you recall that? It was at the time when you were deciding to cancel the circuit judge's visit."

Dexter mumbled inaudibly.

McBain cupped an ear and leaned forward, "Pardon me?"

"I said, vaguely. I recall something you mentioned along those lines, *vaguely*," Dexter admitted. "But why would you be the bait? Sure, Kenny said he was gonna kill you but I thought it was just so much big talk. Maybe you're suggestin' Kenny hired Muley to help him? Not likely... the whole Lester outfit couldn't have come up with five Double Eagles. Ever."

"No, Sheriff, I'm telling you this much, because it pertains to my innocence, but ask me nothing more: Someone hired Muley Trippett to bust Kenny Lester out of your jail. That's the first part of the job. The second part is that they were supposed to kill me. To someone, I don't know who, my being dead is worth five Double Eagles... maybe more."

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“Kill you?” Why would anyone want to kill you? I’d like to kick your ass sometimes but I wouldn’t kill you... unless I caught you escapin’ from my jail.”

Ole Evenson pushed the office door open with his foot and entered, carrying a covered tray. The old Norwegian did not appear to take notice that McBain was no longer in the cell. He placed the platter on a chair beside the prisoner and took a seat on the remaining one.

“Thanks, Ole,” McBain said, shifting the tray onto his lap.

“So,” Dexter continued, “do you have any evidence, any proof to back up what you’re tellin’ me?”

McBain forked some scrambled egg into his mouth, masticating infuriatingly slowly. At length, when he felt the sheriff’s blood pressure had risen sufficiently, he spoke. “Barbara Kirwin, the waitress at May Anne’s, does she live with her parents?”

Confused by this change in direction, Dexter opted not to ask. “She lives with her father and mother, George and Alice Kirwin, yes.”

“She was sweet on Kenny Lester. He went to visit her last night after I tailed him and Muley Trippett into town... Maybe you ought to discreetly round up George Kirwin and his daughter Barbara.



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They aren't guilty or suspected of anything that I know of, but they may be able to provide sufficient evidence to keep you from wasting good air, breathing down my neck."

"Bring George Kirwin to my office?"

Dexter protested. "George is a prosperous business man; he owns a healthy share of the stage line; he's the mayor of Way-cross; he pays my wages!"

McBain finished his breakfast while Moody stewed. He reached in a vest pocket for a cheroot that was no longer there because Dexter had taken them from him after making the prisoner give up his personal effects; that is to say, the personal effects that the sheriff could find. "Can I have my things back?" McBain asked innocently.

Dexter roughly tugged open a desk drawer, rummaged until he located the cigarillos and tossed them to his 'guest'. "I suppose you'd like me to hand over that revolver you're so fond of flashin' about too? Well, that ain't going to take place for a while yet. You are still my prisoner and you'd best start behavin' like one."

Ole Evenson winked at McBain. "Ja, it doesn't do to get on the wrong side of the sheriff." He grinned.

Dexter pulled himself to his feet, "All right, since you two hit it off so well, and I fired my deputy, Ole, you keep an eye on this slippery bugger while I go round up the mayor."

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“And his daughter,” McBain added.

As he stomped out of the office, Moody Dexter muttered, “And his daughter.”

During Dexter's absence, Preston Diamond learned Lonny Fischer's story from Ole Evenson. The lad, Ole estimated his age fifteen, had lost his mother a few hours after he came into the world. Luke Fischer, Lonny's father, performed an admirable job of raising the child until a few years ago when more grief descended upon the already reduced Fischer family.

Ole said that Luke Fischer had been a top-notch hand. In a land and time where cowboys were plentiful, few of them ranking lower than expert (if a formal grading had been established), a rider must be phenomenal to stand out. Luke Fischer demonstrated his prowess annually at the dipping vat where local ranch hands had a chance to test their skills in friendly competition. Luke Fischer, folks said, could ride “anything with hair on”. He handled a lariat with unerring accuracy, as if it were a thirty foot extension of himself. The man was quick, strong and efficient. When not working cattle, Luke trained horses. Cowboys from all over the territory travelled many miles to

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purchase a Luke Fischer broke mount. Segundo at the big “Rafter T” outfit, he earned top wages and had a private bunkhouse for himself and young Lonny.

Losing your wife ought to be sufficient grief for one man's life time but fate dealt Luke Fischer another brutal blow, ironically, on Lonny's tenth birthday: A green-broke bronc became suicidal on a precipitous shale slope. Fighting the bit, the fear-crazed animal reared up, lost its footing and toppled over sideways. Luke and the horse tumbled, rolled, skidded in a confused avalanche of man, equine, shale and rock for two hundred feet down the ravine. When the dust cloud drifted off, the bronc lay dead... Luke Fischer wished he was. His legs would not move and excruciating pain gnawed at his insides.

Doc Stohl kept Fischer alive.

The doctor fixed the internal damage, cleaned and sewed the multitude of gashes, mended the broken bones to a point where Luke could hobble around with crutches, eventually a cane, but Doctor Stohl's medical genius could not repair the broken man within.

Luke went into a depression that no one, not even son Lonny, could fetch him out of. The pair moved to town, taking residence in a shack that barely met the simple criterion of “a roof over their heads”. The father became an occasional binge

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drinker, the son roamed the streets. For a time they survived on money Luke had saved from his horse deals. When the savings ran out Lonny quit school to work odd jobs about town. When work became scarce, necessity drove the lad to improvise.

Ole averred the youngster was “a good kid” but he could soon be headed down the wrong path. Luke Fischer offered no guidance at a time when Lonny needed it most.

Preston Diamond remembered another young boy who lost his parents. The kindness of a very great man had given this orphan the opportunity, the luxury, of making his own choices.

Lonny Fischer deserved the chance that Preston had been offered.

Dexter interrupted Ole's narration, striding into the office, the door rattling as he roughly pushed it closed behind him. “Mayor Kirwin prefers that we meet at his place. He doesn't want gossip running rampant when folks see his daughter dragged into the sheriff's office. Kirwin will be at his house shortly so we can go there, but maybe not together. Can I trust you, McBain, to show up if I release you from custody?... call it parole?”

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“The Colt goes with me, Sheriff. If my theory is accurate, there is still someone out there wanting me dead. I'd rather be able to defend myself.”

Moody Dexter retrieved McBain's effects from the office drawer. Passing the gun in its holster to the prisoner he sighed. “It's a hell of a situation when the condemned man tells the law what to do.”

McBain grinned as he strapped on the revolver. “As long as it is the *right* thing to do.”

Folks lingering along the street were rewarded to see further action from the sheriff's office. Dexter emerged followed by the gunman he had recently arrested. The two spoke briefly then went in separate directions. The prisoner was wearing a gun! The rumour ripple, having ebbed momentarily, surged to tsunami.

Brad McBain stepped past the porch swing and knocked on the Kirwins' door. The bareheaded gentleman he had last evening seen wearing a housecoat and slippers responded immediately. Today, not surprisingly, the man appeared fully clothed for the street, wearing a stylish, flat-crowned western hat upon his head. “Come in,” he said in a tone more curious than unfriendly.

McBain stepped directly into the kitchen. The room felt warm; Mrs. Kirwin had the cook-

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stove stoked up for baking. She offered a faint smile, a smudge of white flour on her cheek. Sheriff Dexter sat at the table, his big hands wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee. A red-eyed Barbara Kirwin, also seated at the kitchen table, refused to acknowledge the stranger; only the venue had changed in that regard. Obviously the girl had not gone to work today.

Dexter grunted, "George Kirwin, Bradley McBain."

Kirwin offered his hand, saying, "My wife, Alice; my daughter, Barbara."

McBain appreciated the firm grip, acknowledging the ladies with a friendly nod.

After they had seated themselves, Mrs. Kirwin poured coffee for her husband and the newcomer.

"So... can anyone tell me what this is all about?" Kirwin looked from Dexter to McBain.

The sheriff started to speak but McBain beat him to the punch. "As you undoubtedly know Muley Trippett and Kenny Lester, in separate incidents, were killed last night or early this morning. Sheriff Dexter had a shoot out with Lester..."

A half-sob escaped from Kirwin's daughter but she did not leave the room.

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“Later, Muley was murdered in his jail cell,” McBain continued. “There are certain folks,” he glanced at Moody, “who think I may have been involved in Trippett's death.”

“But where do I fit into all this?” George Kirwin asked. “Can you fill me in on that account? None of it involves me; I can't even guess why you two are here.”

“Not you directly,” McBain agreed, “but your daughter may have some information... and you too, could have heard something.”

Barbara Kirwin cast fearful eyes at the speaker.

“You cannot know everything involved here, but I will fill you in on what is available. Yesterday, I trailed Lester and Muley into town—it was Muley who pistol-whipped Ole Evenson and sprung Kenny from jail—I had a hunch they would return so I waited for them. When they reached the edge of Way-cross, Muley headed to the saloon (no one suspected him, or so he thought) and Kenny Lester came here, to your house. I tailed Lester and stood near while he talked to your daughter.”

Barbara Kirwin gasped loudly.

George Kirwin cursed, “You sneaking son-of-a-bitch! On whose authority could you do that?”

Dexter broke in soothingly, “Easy there, George, You know I fired that useless deputy Ben Adams. Well, McBain here, offered to do some

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investigatin' for me. I gave him the go-ahead." Moody shifted his weight and winced for effect. "This damn bullet in my hip don't allow me to move around so good yet and I had a fugitive jail breaker and rail- depot robber runnin' loose..."

While Kirwin digested this colossal lie, Preston only partially masked his astonishment. Dexter never batted an eye.

"I wasn't on the town payroll," McBain explained in haste. "The situation involves me," he added vaguely.

"Okay, get to the point," Kirwin growled.

McBain opted to take the offensive. "How much of the conversation between your daughter and Kenny Lester did you hear last night?"

Kirwin reddened, "I do not eavesdrop."

"They weren't exactly whispering, Mr. Kirwin, you must have heard something?"

Barbara Kirwin rose from her seat, preparing to flee the room. "Barbara, sit down," her father commanded angrily. Her mother, dazed and fearful, stood beside her daughter, laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"You know what I heard, you nosy bastard. You heard everything too."

Barbara began to sob openly.

McBain locked eyes with George Kirwin. Leaving no margin for conjecture he spoke



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meaningfully, “*All that either of us heard was Kenny Lester saying these exact words: “We got a little chore to take care of tonight... Muley and I got to take care of that McBain fella...”*”

Silence.

“Is that what was said, George?” Dexter asked. “Muley had a hundred bucks, five Double Eagles in his pocket when I locked him up last night. McBain, here, maintains Trippett and Lester were hired by somebody to kill him.”

Shocked, stunned, or maybe just relieved, Kirwin shifted his gaze to the sheriff. “Yes,” he said quietly. “Yes, that is exactly what Kenny said.”

Barbara Kirwin stood up and shuffled out of the room; her mother followed. Kirwin watched them go, sadness welling in his eyes.



## *Chapter 11*

From a position of open concealment, Preston Diamond watched the approach of the noon stage coach. The lathered horses came to a plunging, dusty halt in front of the depot. Hands were unhitching the team as quickly as the conveyance stopped rolling. A youth scrambled up on the seat, took a convivial jibe from the driver, and commenced passing down luggage to another lad. George Kirwin himself opened the door to greet the passengers.

It was not a red carper affair, however Preston believed a certain amount of fan-fair had been rehearsed for the arrival of the first passenger to emerge from the coach.

“Governor Rittinger!” Mayor Kirwin boomed. “Welcome back to Way-cross!”

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Rittinger stepped down to the street shaking Kirwin's hand and slapping him on the back. "Good to be back, George," he laughed, "and a fine job your driver did bringing me here. Not too many potholes. No highwaymen."

The two men continued a raucous conversation while Kirwin assisted the next passenger and her child down from the stage. The lady would have looked prettier if not showing the weariness of travel fatigue. The youngster, obviously having just awoken, clung to his mother's hand, blinking in the unaccustomed sunlight. Preston heard her ask Kirwin if they had missed the afternoon train. He assured her that punctuality was a certainty for his operation, "The train might be late, but the stage is *always* on time." The governor laughed heartily. Rivalry between stage lines and rail-roads had been stiff, sometimes violent, in the past. Now they complemented each other. Giving Rittinger a tired smile, the lady led the child in the direction of the Union Pacific station.

Diamond caught his breath upon instant recognition of the final member to debark. The man was a giant. As he prepared to exit, the stage tilted under his weight, springs protesting audibly; when he stepped lightly, almost daintily, to the ground; the coach rocketed back and forth, juddering like a green sapling until it regained

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equilibrium. Straightening up, the fellow must have stood taller than six-foot-six. Even through his buckskin shirt one could detect the ripple of powerful muscle. He had thighs like the trunks on Dexter's cottonwoods; arms like the neck on Diamond's new horse. The man's gargantuan skull was the most striking feature. Preston had never seen another head nearly so large. Although more round than angular, the face managed to retain the definite lines of native heritage; sharp, chiselled features on a flat rock. The nose was a monstrous two-dimensional object with flared nostrils that appeared to have been squashed flat by a tremendous impact. Thick dark lips encircled the cavernous mouth. Preston imagined a full sized dinner plate with a heaping helping would easily fit inside. Long black hair hung in a braid down the centre of his back. Diamond recalled that a keen-edged throwing knife lay hidden under that braid, its sheath sewn into the buckskin shirt at the nape of the man's bull neck; he could flip the instrument with amazing speed and accuracy.

A half-breed, the son of a Scottish trader, his mother a full blood Lakota; the giant had travelled under many assumed names. However, as his magnitude and infamy grew, it became superfluous to attempt to conceal his identity. His father, Edward Rankin, from whom he inherited his size, christened his new son Byron Adelaide

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Rankin. His pretty mother, Little Cloud, named him Red Elk. Now the man accepted, along with a healthy serving of respect, the appellation “Chief” or “The Chief”, depending on context, when among the white skinned side of his heritage.

So the story went, the Chief killed his first man at the age of thirteen: A young buck, disdainful of the the white man's marriage vows and foregoing the subtlety of courtship, directed romantic inclination toward young Byron Rankin's beautiful mother. Hearing the commotion, the lad, already huge for his age, rushed into his father's trading post, grabbed a pick handle and killed the attacker with a single, two-handed blow to the head. The Chief could not remember the second man he murdered nor did he know the tally. Though skilled with knife and firearms, most of his victims were brought to their death by his huge, bare hands.

The Chief enjoyed watching life slip through his fingers.

The half-breed accepted his buckskin luggage from the handler, nodded to Kirwin and grinned at the Governor. He strode away toward the centre of town. “Behave yourself, Chief,” Rittinger called good-naturedly. The giant turned, his perpetual, mirthless smile spreading. In a thick brogue, he replied, “You know I will, Governor. I *always* behave myself.”

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Preston Diamond remained motionless in the shade of the depot, behind and slightly to the right, just a stone's throw away from the stage coach. No one had noticed him, though several of the employees passed within a few yards. He heard the company manager tell Governor Rittinger his luggage would be delivered to the Grand Hotel. The flamboyant politician thanked Kirwin profusely then departed in the wake of The Chief.

A fresh sextet was hitched to the coach, the outbound mail and luggage loaded. New passengers, a young man and his lovely wife, boarded. A replacement driver slapped the reins across the rumps of the team and urged, "Gidd-up". The passenger vehicle gained momentum, disappearing in a cloud of its own dust when it turned at the intersection onto the main street.

The stage manager, cargo manifest in hand, went inside the depot. Suddenly, as if struck by an afterthought, he returned to the doorway. He stared at the vacant spot where Diamond had stood, shook his head, then ducked back inside.

Sam's Sewing Shop had become a very busy establishment. Samantha and Matilda worked furiously, maintaining an exhausting pace in their seamstress chores; at last a faint light glimmered at the end of the textile tunnel they had sewn their way through. The dresses and gown for the first of

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the two weddings had been completed. The second set required several alterations, a lace veil had to be constructed. The ladies were in a more relaxed mood realizing, for the moment, more work lay behind than ahead.

The little bell above the entrance door tinkled. Sam glanced up to see a bright beaming smile as Governor Rittinger entered. He bowed forward, kissing her hand gallantly. "Sam Dexter, I do believe you grow prettier each time I see you!"

"Governor Rittinger, are you practising for a campaign or are you simply a perennial lady's man?" Samantha teased.

The politician laughed heartily. "I don't plan to ever be on a campaign trail but it is paramount for a politician to stay on the good side of the people." He winked, "*Especiallly* the lovely ladies."

Matilda had not reacted to the door chime but caught the movement as Rittinger made his way toward her. He knelt in front of her, touching a kiss to the widow's hand, "Ah, Mrs. Frye," he said softly, forming the words carefully, so as to allow the deaf lady to read his lips. "Always such a pleasure to see you. Are you well? Is Samantha working you too hard?"



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Matilda looked to Samantha before responding, "I am very well, thank you, Governor. We have been quite busy but things are catching up now."

"Good! Good!" He spoke without a trace of insincerity in his voice.

Rittinger straightened up. "Well, just thought I'd drop in to see how my favourite Way-cross ladies are. Must dash over to the Grand to see if my luggage arrived in one dusty piece."

Samantha and Matilda watched him go. "Rush in, rush out! What an old flirt!" Samantha laughed.

Matilda smiled faintly.

Widow Frye's smile faded completely with the entrance of the next customer: The stranger who had startled Matilda out of her wits by knocking Muley Trippett through the window, arrived almost on the heels of the Governor's exit. Samantha met him at the counter. "Good afternoon, Mr. McBain," she greeted reservedly.

Preston tipped his hat, "Miss Dexter; Mrs. Frye..."

"Through my round window I see that you and my father have been visiting back and forth...?" Sam's voice trailed off, turning the statement into a question.

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“Sheriff Dexter thought I should be in jail. The accommodations at the hotel were too posh for the likes of me.”

“Dad seems to have reversed that decision... or have you broken out?”

“We settled for parole.”

“Governor Rittinger is in town...” Preston changed the subject, fishing for information.

“Yes, he just stopped in to our shop.”

“Oh, did he tear his pants on the stage?”

Sam frowned. “No, he makes a point of dropping in to say hello whenever his travels bring him to Way-cross. He’s just a friendly person.”

Preston sensed he may have touched a nerve. By way of dismissal, he shrugged, “Never met the man... I’ve come for the pleasure of asking you to join me for supper this evening.”

Samantha sorted through this sentence.

“The pleasure of asking me?”

“Yes.” Preston smiled disarmingly. “If you refuse, I shall still have had the pleasure of asking.”

Samantha laughed, intensifying her beauty.

“I should be honoured to accompany you Mr. McBain.

Preston Diamond had padded half-way across the hotel lobby before Frank Collier and a guest at the registration desk noticed his approach.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

They had been conversing in low, earnest tones when Frank suddenly raised his voice, "Just sign here Governor Rittinger. It certainly is a pleasure to have you staying with us again..."

The politician made a flourish of signing the registration. He then turned to face the newcomer who nodded silent acknowledgement.

"Oh, Governor Rittinger, this is Mr. McBain, another of our favoured guests. Mr. McBain has been staying with us for nearly a week now. Mr. McBain, Governor Rittinger."

"Mr. McBain, pleased to meet you."  
Rittinger shook Preston's hand vigorously.

"Governor, an honour. I do not encounter many dignitaries in my limited travels."

"Way-cross is the attraction," Rittinger avowed. "I declare the food and accommodations are as fine here as anywhere I go... and, between you and me," he winked, "that's a fair piece."

What the Governor lacked in height, he had begun to compensate in girth. He appeared a surprisingly young man for a governorship. Handsome, he retained a full head of fairish hair that only showed signs of graying on the sides. He carried himself well, dressed meticulously and spoke the polished lingo of the quintessential politician.

The brief introduction eventually led to a cocktail in the lounge of the Grand Hotel. Rittinger

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loved to talk, Diamond had the patience to listen. Preston had no reason for tapping the Governor for information but everything meant something to somebody. Later he would riffle through the trash, salvaging anything that may be useful. Without effort, Rittinger presented the epitome of sincerity. A "What you see is what I am" persona. After all, he must have convinced the President of the Union in order to achieve the posting he now held. Preston learned that Rittinger was a widower; his wife had passed away several years ago, prior to his appointment to the governorship. There had been no children. Understandably, since the death of his dear wife, politics superseded all else in his life. The governor talked just loud enough to ensure that the few lounge patrons nearby could hear if they chose to listen. Volume increased as he articulated, "My life is dedicated entirely to the betterment of the Territory. Very soon farmers, merchants, settlers from back east and all over the world will be emigrating to this land. Prosperity for the region is just around the corner." Suddenly, dropping tone to a conspiratorial hush, he confided, "Don't tell the stage line folks, but my office is lobbying the Union Pacific Railroad to extend the Way-cross spur. Railways, not stage coaches, are the vehicle to expedite growth. That is what brings me to Way-cross today."

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Preston wondered why the man felt compelled to share what ought to be confidential information with a stranger. Perhaps Rittinger may be visiting Way-cross simply for the luxury offered by the Grand Hotel.... Perhaps business associated with extension of the Union Pacific drew him to this end-of-the-line town. Perhaps there could be an entirely different motivation.... The Governor had definitely piqued Preston Diamond's interest.

Supper with Samantha Dexter obliterated the after-taste of a cocktail with Rittinger. The young couple appeared oblivious to the many stares and the occasional dark glance of disapproval from Grand Hotel habitués. Way-cross did not think kindly of a possible budding relationship between 'their seamstress' and a stranger, particularly a gunman.

The couple were quietly reviewing the menu when Governor Rittinger swept into the lounge. Stopping at their table, he slopped unctuous familiarity over Sam like a new grandmother fussing after a baby. After too long, in Preston's opinion, the politician moved on saying, "I'll see you kids later." Preston followed him with his ears as the Governor cut a theatrical

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and circuitous path to his own table. Like every political figure worthy of insult, Rittinger had a knack for recalling names and faces. It seemed he knew everyone in the dining room.

Except "The Chief."

Preston found it curious that Governor Rittinger only had a curt nod, no indication of recognition for the giant who sat alone at a table in a corner. Three hours previous, the pair had practically been on a first name basis.

Samantha talked about herself and McBain encouraged the conversation. She asked questions of him and only hours later did she realize he had told her nothing. Neither heard or seemed to be aware that there were other people in the establishment. McBain casually mentioned that he had read posters announcing a family dance scheduled for Saturday night. Samantha replied simply that she would be attending with her parents. The meal went by too quickly. Cossetting service, exquisite food, excellent wine and the delicious chocolate 'Chef's Surprise' left Samantha feeling embarrassed. Her companion laughed when she apologized for her repletion. Sam remarked that McBain had certainly not overindulged. He replied that Ole had fed him too well in jail this morning.

An uncomfortable interruption in the repast occurred when the half-breed made his exit.

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Openly leering at Samantha, he made a deliberate detour to come near the table where she and McBain sat. Preston watched the brute's eyes, they held no trace of recognition. "Maybe the pretty lass would enjoy the company of a real man this evening?" The Chief smiled without warmth. It was a taunt, but McBain refused the bait. He didn't even rise up from his chair.

Paralysing fear grew in Samantha's beautiful eyes. The Boston assault flashed across her mind. She suddenly felt sick. What would happen if this huge disgusting animal should attack her? Nothing short of bullets would stop the heinous Goliath. She nervously searched McBain's face, knowing he could be of no assistance. To her surprise, she found no trace of fear; if anything, mild amusement.

"How about it, yellow haired lady... like to sleep in my teepee tonight?"

"Better move along, Chief," Preston said softly. "The Governor told you to behave yourself."

Silence had flooded the lounge, poured over into the kitchens. No murmur, no movement.

The half-breed seldom witnessed another man who offered no humbleness or awe in his presence. Usually noisome fear assailed his

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flattened nostrils, fuelling his ego; a burning fuse for his explosive violent nature. This fool, this inconsequential piece of white trash, took no notice. It was a new experience for the big man.

“Nobody tells me to behave myself,” Chief sneered. “I could break you... and the Governor,” he snapped his banana fingers, “like a match.”

“Well not this evening,” Preston sounded apologetic. “I’ll be around town for awhile yet. Let me know when you are ready.”

McBain returned to his conversation with Samantha. The girl wasn't hearing anything he said. Though quaking with fear she bravely tried to follow his example. Ignoring the Chief she even threw in a light laugh and an unrelated reply that flabbergasted McBain completely.

The breed straightened, looked uncertainly around the room, noted the muted silence, maybe caught a glance of disapproval from Governor Ritinger; for whatever reason, he did not press the issue further. With a grunt of disgust, he strode out of the lounge.

“You must not let that interruption spoil our evening.” McBain insisted. “There are many people who believe ignorance is a voice to be heard. It is not. It's the road to degradation.”

“You weren't afraid?” she quavered.



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“Enjoy your dinner,” Preston smiled.  
“There is no one else in all the universe. Just you and I.”

Diamond accompanied Samantha to the livery, saddled her horse —her father had come to town early to arrest McBain, so neither had used the buggy— and gave her a leg-up. Instead of handing her the reins he started walking, leading the horse down the street. “Brad,” she protested, “I am perfectly capable of riding my horse home.”

“Not tonight, Samantha. Maybe not tonight.”

Her voice caught, “Oh... I thought we were forgetting that incident.”

When Bradley McBain made no reply, she asked tentatively, “Why were you not afraid of that monster?”

“When it comes right down to it, Fear is never an ally. If I had been afraid, it would have excited The Chief. He would not have left us alone. Bullies thrive on others' terror.”

“Only, it took me back to a time, a horrible time...”

Preston coaxed the story from her lips. At first, bit by bit, she gave him pieces. Under his gentle reassurance, she finally told him what only

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Moody and her mother had ever heard before. The terrible nightmare attack in Boston. A nightmare that still haunts her sleep. She wept when it was all out.

Diamond handed her his handkerchief. Remaining silent he gave Samantha a moment to recover.

As he led the horse through the cottonwoods along Moody Dexter's lane, she said quietly, "I'm sorry, Brad, I shouldn't have..."

He looked up at her, his eyes moist. "I am very glad you told me..."

## *Chapter 12*

Generally speaking, most people have cause to lose their poise at one time or another. Preston's training did not allow him to cast off self-control, but he could, and occasionally did, willingly override this inherent subjugation, permitting his temper full rein in certain special instances. These times invariably proved unfortunate for the subject of his vexation. Occasions when rampant anger made him "see black", as it were, occurred when Preston Diamond witnessed abuse of animals, children or women. He dealt swift and strict lessons to perpetrators of such injustices...

The sleep Moody Dexter had rudely interrupted in the morning did not immediately return this evening. Preston Diamond's subconscious had deliberately stalled the drowsiness allowing him to review events of the day. His thoughts centred around the beautiful lady who had joined him for dinner. Her heart breaking

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story now tortured his mind. However, Samantha's version had been in error on two counts: The young man who rescued her was not a policeman; the assailant had not been knocked unconscious:

Several years previous, Preston Diamond worked an assignment in Boston. The project required: establish the existence, identify the perpetrators and bring to justice a cabal of racketeers associated with a particular workers' union. A foot-in-the-door necessitated taking a position in a union run operation at a shipyard. In this demanding employment, with its rough and tumble after hours excitement, Preston tested and honed his investigative talents, ferreting out the subservient, greedy rodents who did the bidding for the King Rat. The trail grew complex, at times confusing. Patient perseverance eventually exposed the pertinent information required to supply conclusive evidence. In its turn, this evidence led to multiple convictions.

Mid-winter relaxed an extended cold snap. Favourable weather descended upon the Tea Party City. On an especially mild Saturday afternoon, Preston Diamond tailed a gangly, unkempt ruffian believed to be a messenger, a pawn whom Preston hoped would lead him another step higher, another step closer, in the the widening circle of his investigation. Initially the hoodlum travelled alone

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but during the course of the afternoon he had met up with a second chap of like character. Together the pair left a noisy, tobacco smoke filled bar with Diamond, unknown to them, in tow. When the men crossed the open space of Boston Common, a park and part time pasture near town central, Preston allowed the two to put some distance between hunter and prey. Evening had started to settle in, patrons of the park thinned. Preston's subjects suddenly disappeared into a small copse on the edge of the Common. He considered the possibility he had been discovered. Perhaps they lay in ambush.

Caution necessitated deliberation, however the tracker did not wish to have wasted a day's work. Suddenly hysterical screams, feminine screams of terror, reached his ears. Preston raced across the open area but the cries faded. He could not make his body move fast enough. The soft, slushy snow dragged at his feet. Time stood still. He struggled, clawed his way through a slow-motion freeze. Blood roaring in his ears, heart pounding against the wall of his chest, lungs starving for oxygen, Preston at last reached the fateful grove. Pausing to listen, the rush inside his own body masked his hearing. Closing his eyes he mentally forced calmness. A moment later Diamond detected muffled sounds of a struggle. Following the intermittent utterances, he soon

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reached the heinous, sickening scene. The man Preston had trailed all day was viciously attacking a young lady. The girl fought valiantly but the thug murderously struck her in the face knocking her senseless. The odious villain began tearing at her clothes...

Preston Diamond "saw black".

Swiftly, methodically, Diamond punished the wretched by-product of humanity. He kept the attacker conscious, alive, only long enough for the gates of hell to swing open offering a welcome retreat.

Police arrived to find Preston attempting to console the bruised and battered young woman. Nearly hysterical, she begged them to find her companion. An officer led her away; a second took Preston's report. Darkness halted the search; the ravished body of the friend was found next day. No clues to the identity of the second attacker surfaced. Preston Diamond hoarded the information he held; the rapist represented the only thread he now had to find King Rat.

In time the thug did provide the connection Preston sought. Under Diamond's direction, Boston police carried out a raid, arresting the hoodlum along with several of his cohorts. The information dragged from these felons proved the undoing of the union racketeering ring.

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In exchange for the evidence they needed for a conviction, the prosecution agreed to release the stool pigeon. Diamond realized the criminal would never be taken to task for the rape and murder of the deceased girl. This knowledge Preston found difficult to live with. He could not rest. At night he saw the terror in the eyes of the beautiful young woman he had rescued. He heard the cries of the girl he had not been able to save. Utilizing prestigious links, Diamond gained access to the prison.

The Chinese Master, under whose tutelage Preston practised martial arts, imparted that there are many ways for a man to die. Chinese medicine evolved through centuries of experimentation; they did not use laboratory rats. Anatomical knowledge, beneficial results, at least for future generations, came from the life sacrifice of many, many 'patients'. These findings have been remarkably useful in terms of healing and self-defence. Diamond learned that an opponent can be killed instantly, in a minute, an hour, a day and so on, up to one, two, or even five years.

When Preston privately interviewed the rapist, he opted for the two day plan.

Rested, Preston Diamond emerged from his room. Had there been anyone in the passage they would have been surprised at his sudden, silent

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appearance. No one saw him as he stealthily padded along the dim, lamp-lit hallway. Instead of taking the lower flight of stairs, this night he softly trod up to the third floor level. Preston had discovered earlier, by a surreptitious glance at the hotel registry, where Governor Rittinger had taken residence. The Governor intrigued the investigator; could the lubricious politician possibly be more than he presented?

Never overlook; never underestimate; these policies were commandments in Diamond's world. He edged up to Rittinger's door, listening for sounds from within. The rooms in the Grand Hotel afforded considerable sound proofing, a luxury Preston periodically craved. On this occasion he would have appreciated being able to overhear activities behind closed doors. Some time passed as Preston internally tuned his dichotic ears. The louder noises issuing from two floors down were filtered through the left ear, the murmur of whispered voices beyond the oak door registered through the right. Individual words, sentences of the conversation from within the room he could not decipher. The gist came through quite clearly. Preston backed away, stepped noiselessly down the stair to his floor, collected his coat, descended to the lobby and vanished through the rear exit of the Grand Hotel.



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From snatches of muted conversation Diamond had overheard, the eavesdropper drew several conclusions: Rittinger had a lady-friend in Way-cross; the two had known each other well enough to be quite 'friendly'; the visitor was more than a hired lady of the night.

Preston recollected that the governor had no feminine accompaniment during the dinner hour so the clandestine rendezvous, if that is what it was, may have been previously arranged. Way-cross would not consider it appropriate for a lady to openly walk into the hotel and trot up the stair for an intimate evening with the governor. No, someone probably assisted the politician in smuggling his guest unnoticed into the hotel. Preston recollected the hushed conversation between Rittinger and Collier, their sudden change of tone upon discovering his presence. What secrets did they share?

Back streets and alleys of Way-cross had become familiar ground for Diamond. Even the trash can cats no longer dashed away at his approach. They had less fear of him than the town folk who weren't at all comfortable with Preston's presence, although likely exceptions included Lonny Fischer, hopefully Samantha Dexter and probably the undertaker, Russell Frost. The unlit avenues were particularly dark on this evening, clouds had been building during late afternoon,

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now the air held a hint of rain. Diamond stealthily made a quick reconnaissance discovering nothing amiss. Obfuscated by darkness, he took up a comfortable position preparing for prolonged surveillance across the alley from the rear entrance of the hotel.

A swiftly advancing cloud bank gobbled up the stars. Darkness blended with, then vanished into, an inky blackness so thick you could poke it with a stick. The wind propelling the clouds touched down on Way-cross, stirring the dust and cinders. It blew stronger. Grit sandblasted Diamond where he maintained a statue's silent sojourn. Up and down the alley, unlatched screen doors and shutters banged and flapped. Garbage receptacles tipped over, their contents, including several surprised cats, fled ahead of the gale. The coal oil lantern burning above the Grand Hotel's rear entrance door rocked on its mooring. The light grew weak, flickering in protest but did not go out.

A solitary streak of angry, jagged lightning split the darkness. A single drum roll of thunder reverberated in applause. Then it started to rain.

Buckets.

Most people would have sought shelter. Preston Diamond did. However, just before abandoning his post, the rear door of the hotel opened against the force of the wind. A lady

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clutching at her dress, fighting the gale, stood framed in the dying lamp light. In the brief instant before the lantern blew out, something familiar about the woman struck Preston....



## *Chapter 13*

The storm blew itself out after two hours, leaving in its wake the aftermath of a three inch deluge. On the flat the rain had struck so hard it left no mud. Wagon ruts and low areas flooded. Pasture land greened up overnight. Way-cross's normally dusty streets had turned to a sloppy but fertile mixture of mud and horse manure by mid-morning. The weather man, had there been one, would have been confused as to whether he had done the right thing or not. Cattle ranchers were smiling. Folks who lost shutters, doors, shingles and received a flooding of their homes were not so enthusiastic.

Preston Diamond, oblivious, slept late. He seldom took weather or climactic conditions personally, finding it more agreeable to accept those things over which he had no control.

Though she looked exhausted and red eyed, Preston noted Barbara Kirwin had resumed her work at May Anne's eatery. The passing storm had

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not left a rainbow on her brow. He thought it odd she would be at her job this morning as Kenny Lester's funeral was to be held at two o'clock this afternoon. Another grim thought: On the week, three Lesters and Muley Trippet would be buried... Certainly one piece of real-estate in high demand around Way-cross was the town's cemetery. The sour waitress refilled Preston's cup. He fished a toothpick from a vest pocket. Service needed a bracing up but the food, and especially the coffee at May Anne's were well worth a repeat visit.

Diamond chose to stand outside the sheriff's office while enjoying his morning cheroot. Surprisingly, the gale hadn't ripped the awning from this building. He noted various pieces of other edifices strewn along the street. Way-cross seemed quite busy on this, a Saturday morning. Two wagons —one loaded, the other empty— a buckboard, a buggy and several riders slopped down the street deepening the ruts, throwing a spray of muck in their passage. Preston watched from the corner of his eye as The Chief ambled down the boardwalk toward him. The big man merely grunted as he went by. Perhaps he didn't recognize Diamond from last evening's verbal exchange.

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Sheriff Dexter emerged from his office, studied the street then noticed the man standing beside him. “Wouldn't be the first time someone took a shot at a fellow standing in that spot.”

“Good morning to you too, Moody. Did your Herefords receive a good scrubbing last night?”

“Those cows will be up to their knees in grass before long,' Dexter responded gleefully. “Maybe I'll manage a second cut on my hay this summer.”

Dexter changed the subject, “The big breed I just saw walkin' past here... Sam said you an' him had some words last night?”

“He's trouble, Sherriff, a free-lance killer. People who really want someone dead leaving no ties or questions hire “The Chief.” He often tries to force a fight, sometimes he simply murders the victim... usually with his bare hands.”

Dexter studied the younger man. “You seem to know him well.”

McBain shrugged, “We've met. He doesn't remember me.”

“So,” Dexter scratched his stubbly chin, “No doubt the Chief, as you call him, has been hired by someone in Way-cross to kill you? That fits along with Muley and Kenny being hired killers don't it?”

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McBain returned the jibe with another, "The Chief arrived here on yesterday's stage. If he had been passing through, he would have caught the train out. The big brute is here for a reason. I've told you what he does for a living; he might be looking for me... But he could be hunting small town sheriffs. You never know with him."

Dexter grunted. "Well, I hope it's you an' not me. My old Navy probably don't have enough powder to stop that giant."

McBain suddenly turned grave. "Moody, don't get drawn into anything with him. Even if it's law business. Stay clear. Come or send someone to find me."

Dexter saw the earnest appeal in McBain's eyes. He swallowed loudly, "I'll do that, Brad... Thanks."

McBain turned to leave, flicking his dead cigar into the mud of the street. He said over his shoulder, "I'll be around, Moody, longer than the Chief."

Preston rounded the next corner and strolled down the intersecting avenue heading south from the business section; in other words: Main Street. Halfway down the second block he came upon a small house in a sorry state of deterioration. The building could almost have been Joe's shack where Kenny Lester died, but it was situated on the opposite side of town. This derelict little residence



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also differed from Joe's place in that it had tenants. Wet bedding, a stained and crumpled mattress and some ragged clothing were distributed along a tottering, decrepit picket fence. Lonny Fischer, a dark scowl on his face, sat up on the roof, apparently fixing one of the leaks.

McBain called up to the boy. "Did you take on a little water last night, Lonny?"

The tow-headed youngster brightened. "Hello Mr. McBain. Folks say it rained three inches, we got a foot an' it all ran into the house."

Preston climbed the frail excuse for a ladder and agilely hopped onto the roof. Rafters shuddered under his weight. Assessing the situation he opined, "Looks like this is a major repair, Lonny. You lost most of your shingles last night."

"I know Mr. McBain. I tol' Pa but he just got mad and tol' me to get up here an fix it. I don't know what to do... it needs shingles... Where are we goin' to find the money to buy shingles?" The lad's lower lip began to quiver. He tried valiantly to suppress his grief and frustration in front of the man he considered a hero.

"Maybe I can help, Lonny. I know a fellow who has some extra shingles just laying around. I'll go fetch those and we'll put this roof right as... well, good for the next rain."

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Ol' Ross obliged Diamond by not charging for the buckboard, allowing that Lonny was his part time employee and the conveyance would not have far to travel. Leon's Mercantile is the place where Preston had seen the shingles. These he paid for out of his own pocket then hauled the goods to the Fischer dwelling. Lonny had been industriously peeling the old shingles off as McBain had directed. Together they completed that project and began installing the new roof.

Preston felt like the proverbial sitting duck, knowing there were people very near who wanted him dead. Up on the Fischer's roof, he could not have presented a more tempting target. But he considered that the Chief would be the only person hired for the job at this time. The half-breed didn't usually kill from a distance.

The roof was small and the job went fast. Lonny placed the cedar, Preston nailed it down. The two chatted while they worked. Lonny was thrilled to have the locally famous (or infamous, depending upon view point) Bradley McBain helping him on his own roof. What had begun as a soggy, miserable day with no prospect of improvement had turned into the very best time the youngster could remember.

Luke Fischer hobbled out of the house when he could no longer stand the constant hammering and pounding. He shuffled as if his

hips were inflexible. A curved wooden stock cane supported most of the upper body weight as he leaned forward to keep his balance. He still wore the regalia of the ranch hand: riding boots, denim pants, flowered shirt; a colourful bandanna was tied loosely around his neck, a beaten and skuffed western hat rested on his head. The entire ensemble had been off the store shelves for many years. Like his clothes, Luke Fischer also looked a bit shabby around the edges. The cowhand needed a hair cut, a shave, probably a bath, and a month of good meals to set him back on track. He wore loss of self esteem like a repentant man walking to the gallows.

Upon seeing his father, Lonny clamped down on his lower lip, instantly turning sullen. McBain immediately descended the ladder, cordially making his own introduction to the broken cowboy. The man presented a surly attitude, merely grunting in response to McBain's comments and questions. Preston did not seem to notice. He maintained an open, but not over-familiar, discourse. Gradually digging deeper, he forced the man's true nature to the surface. At the same time, imperceptibly, Preston skilfully drew Lonny into a three way conversation. As they worked, Diamond included Luke Fischer in the project, asking him to pass up the hammer that had

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fallen, more nails, a couple more shingles. By the time the roof had a complete double-layer of new cedar, McBain had become a friend to both the Fischers.

Luke invited the new-comer into the little home for a cup of coffee. The place was in very poor condition. It needed attention both structurally and in house-keeping. Broken chairs, still lying around had been replaced with more utilitarian apple boxes. The table had a leather strap serving as a splint on one leg. A Spartan warrior would have complained at the lack of luxury. Preston did not notice Lonny's embarrassment when he apologised, "The place is a mess right now. That rain raised the devil around here..." The coffee had a good flavour and Preston concentrated on that.

McBain asked what seemed a ludicrous question, "Do you think you'll ever go back to working cattle?"

Luke Fischer snorted in disgust, "Cripples don't handle cows. Or," he added bitterly, "horses."

"Well, it is a shame to have so much knowledge lying away dormant, you know, not being put to use," Preston persisted.

Lonny explained, "Pa cain't ride a horse no more, Mr. McBain. His pelvisic bones is broke and they didn't heal right. He cain't even climb into a saddle no more."

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Luke looked at his son then turned to McBain, "It's a tough chore just walkin' around this shack let alone trying to straddle a damn bronc."

"Have you ever tried lowering one stirrup? Sometimes that makes a man sit more comfortable in the saddle."

"Pa ain't been in the saddle since he got banged up so bad..." Lonny turned to his father, "You cain't ride no more, can you, Pa?" A trace of hope made his voice crack.

"No," Luke Fischer sighed. "I don't believe I'll ever be on a horse again."

"Well, that's a load of nonsense," McBain argued amiably. "I bet if I fetched my horse over here you'd be on him in an instant."

Preston saw a quick flash of hungry desire in the man's sunken eyes, but he shook his head, "I know what your trying, Bradley, but it ain't no good... I cain't..."

The younger Fischer broke in, "Won't you at least try, Pa?"

McBain said, "Well, I'll bring my gelding around anyway. Ole Evenson tells me you are the best in the country and I wanted somebody who knows what they're about to take a look at his front legs. The bugger beat himself up fighting the halter a couple days ago."

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Luke Fischer was waiting at the broken gate in front of his home when McBain returned leading the gelding. Lonny, his arms full, dragged the last load of bedding into the house and rushed back outside to help.

The lame man came forward and grasped the gelding's reins. He stood quietly studying the horse. A dim, far away light shone in Luke's sad gray eyes; a reflection of times passed. After a moment, with a small groan, he bent over to inspect the horse's shins. A protesting crack emanated from somewhere in the man's broken body. He winced but no sound passed his lips. "Someone's been rubbin' ointment on these scrapes," he said aloud.

"That's me, Pa," Lonny said proudly. "I been lookin' after Mr. McBain's horse for him down at the Livery."

"Well, that's a good start. I got some stuff in my box in the house there, son. Fetch me that bottle of turpentine, a rag and a cup of warm water. We'll give this bronc's front legs a scrubbin' and then put some more ointment on there."

Lonny rushed inside, eager for the opportunity to paw through his father's war chest.

The 'box' Luke Fischer referred to contained remnants of his working days: brush and curry comb, a bit and reins but no bridle, a pair of tarnished nickel-plated spurs, an assortment of

conchos, rosettes, leather working tools and scraps of leather. The bottle of turpentine, several tins of salve and ointments, a hoof-pick and knife lay in the second of two removable shelves. The cherished contents of the box were all that Luke Fischer had to tie him to the life he had loved. His saddle, his trail worn chaps, even the horse hair lariat, had been sold to buy food for himself and Lonny. Luke had also bought a bottle of liquor with the proceeds from the saddle.

Luke straightened up, another groan escaping his lips. "My boy has this hoss's legs coming along nicely. I can see the critter didn't do hisself too much damage. It's likely to have healed on its own but a guy don't want trouble with flies gettin' in there this time o' year."

Lonny returned with the requested items and Luke set to work, washing the scrapes with diluted turpentine. He soon had the job done. "I won't bother applyin' more ointment. Those burns ain't goin' to bother the horse none now. You can put the turpentine back in the box, Lonny."

Preston thanked Luke but the cowboy only grinned at him. "You didn't bring that horse up here for me to fix up. You an' I both know it." He gazed thoughtfully into the distance as though

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seeing something in the past rather than an object on the horizon. Returning his gaze to the gelding, he said, "I suppose I'm obliged to try to get on you,"

The experience wasn't necessarily pain free when Luke Fischer made his second *début* in the saddle. Bones and joints creaked and protested loudly. The cowboy winced, groaned and bit his lower lip so hard it bled.

But he stayed there.

After the initial shock swept through him and breath came easier, Luke accepted the reins from Preston and goaded the horse ahead. The gelding was a well behaved animal, saving the halter phobia, and he recognized the hand of a master straight off. Luke Fischer made a couple of circuits walking the horse to the end of the street and back. Preston watched father and son closely. Their eyes shone like two youngsters on Christmas morning. "You're doin' it, Pa! You're ridin' a horse again!" Lonny cheered.

"How does it feel, Luke?" McBain asked.

"It's... it's the second best feelin' I've ever had... but it hurts like hell!"

"While you're up there, you may as well ride over to May Anne's where I can buy you boys some supper."



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Luke's face clouded, his pride pinched,  
“You don't owe us supper McBain. We should be  
buyin' for you, seein's how you patched our roof for  
us...”

“Pa, we... I spent the money Ol' Ross paid  
me...”

Suddenly a completely uncharacteristic  
notion seized Diamond. “Actually, I may have a  
business proposition for you both... If it suits you,  
I'd like to discuss it over a meal. And, *I* will pay  
for the supper.”



## *Chapter 14*

Preston led his gelding to the livery after leaving the Fischer's house. Father and son had eaten well at May Anne's. Then Luke half climbed, half crawled, unassisted, onto the back of Preston's horse. Rumour had spread and folks nonchalantly appeared along the street to witness for themselves the hero of the dipping vat, back in the saddle again. Inwardly struggling against the excruciating pain, the senior Fischer proudly rode the animal home.

Ol' Ross had already heard the news when McBain entered the pleasantly redolent barn. The stable became busy as he listened to the hostler expounding upon Fischer's past.

“One o' the best, one o' the best, he was. Could ride horses other people got hurt jus' lookin' at.”

The familiar stream of brown juice painted the feed bucket a fresh coat. “I know horses, McBain, an' I know the boys who make a livin'

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ridin' 'em. Fischer was a cut above all the others around here. There was some good'uns too, like Shorty Weins, Lefty Lindstrom. There were, and still are aplenty. But Luke... Luke Fischer, he was one of the very best."

The arrival of Sheriff Dexter leading a matched pair of bays brought realization to McBain as to why the livery had become such a popular spot. "Goin' dancin' tonight, McBain?"

"Well, the thought had occurred to me yesterday. Since then, up until now, it had slipped my mind."

Ol' Ross took the horses from Dexter saying, "McBain's been too busy rezeerectin' old cowboys to be thinkin' about dancin'."

Several patrons nearby lingered to hear what the hostler had to say. Diamond took the opportunity to slip out unnoticed.

Back in his room, Preston chided himself for not having taken the time to visit the barber for a haircut and proper shave. He washed up, donned a clean suit of clothes from his trunk, concealed the Remington revolver in a special holster behind his back and left the hotel.

Night time lurked just beyond the darkening shadows.

Town Fathers had aspirations of a larger population when they built their education facility.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

The rather big-for-its-time school was normally curtained across the centre to provide two class rooms, but tonight the curtain was rolled back to convert Way-cross school into Way-cross dance hall. Preston thought of Sarah Dickens as he entered the crowded room. He wondered if she would be “dancing” with anyone tonight.

Through a maze of whirling dancers, Preston espied a group of musicians seated haphazardly at the front of the room where a long chalk board spanned the length. Two guitarists, or at least two chaps strumming the instruments, accompanied a fiddle player and, on the left side, a pianist. Beside one of the guitar men, a banjo stood propped against an empty chair. Whether the banjo would be played by one of the existing band members or awaited another player Preston could not guess.

The quartet were enthusiastically sawing, strumming and pounding on their respective instruments, the result being a recognisable tune, Preston decided, not unpleasant. The fiddle player and pianist competed for volume while the guitarists merely kept time. A hooped metal device with a mouthorgan clamped in its jaws hung round the neck of the man seated nearest the banjo.

It wasn't the New York Philharmonic.

The hall felt hot and muggy as it was a warm evening and the recent rain created high

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humidity. The door and those windows which had the option, were open. The dance was well attended, the milling crowd augmenting the heat. A variety of odours, chiefly perfume fragrances worn by the ladies assailed Preston's olfactory system. The floor was rapidly becoming tracked up by mud brought in on peoples' shoes.

Along the near wall to the right of the entrance, a table had been constructed of planks spanning a pair of saw-horses. Two flowered cotton table cloths were spread upon this and a veritable banquet covered the cloth. There must have been a substantial supply of egg salad sandwiches in the mix for that distinctive scent lingered with the perfume. The food supply included a host of other sandwich types, dozens of desserts, cool refreshments for everyone and coffee pots perking on Kerosene burners for the adults. Several middle-aged ladies constantly fussed over the lunch.

Preston studied the people as he shifted easily among the throng. Smaller children, not old enough to be embarrassed, were frolicking together; boys with boys, boys with girls, girls with girls; they didn't appear to have a preference. Older, more dignified lads watched girls of their own age dancing with girls of their own age. A few

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

of these boys danced with their sisters, mothers or an auntie but most stood back wishing they had the nerve to ask a particular young lady to join them on the floor.

A similar situation existed for those in their mid teens. The ubiquitous dance-hall wallflowers pretended to ignore the nervous young men who strutted and acted like fools, pushing and shoving one another. While the females feared in their hearts that no one would dance with them, the lads feared the embarrassment of rejection. An attitude destined for failure.

Diamond barely recognized one lad with his blond hair slicked back, face scrubbed. His clothes were clean, his boots polished, but the attire was shabby. The youth screwed up his courage and asked a quite pretty young lady to dance. She turned away from him without so much as a “no, thank you”. His face grew red as he blushed to the tops of his ears. Preston circumvented the ring of dancers, surreptitiously arriving at Lonny's side.

The boy's dejection evaporated instantly.  
“Hello, Mr. McBain.”

Preston turned as if he had not noticed the lad before, *especially* during the dance refusal.  
“Oh, hi Lonny, I hadn't anticipated meeting you here.”

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“Well, Pa said I ought to get out an' mingle with my own age... trouble is, my own age don't want to mingle with me.”

From the corner of his eye McBain noted that the girl who had refused to dance with the Fischer boy was now blatantly staring. Her mouth hung half open like she had developed a severe mental disorder. *Lonny Fischer was chatting with the man whose name was on the lips of everyone in town!*

Preston clapped Lonny lightly on the back as if they were old pals. “It's because they aren't good enough to associate with you. Deep down, they are ashamed of themselves.”

“I think you got that backwards, Mr. McBain. I'm the one who is ashamed...”

Preston shook his head imperceptibly. Speaking just loud enough for Lonny to hear above the music, he said, “You have nothing to be ashamed of and a whole lot to be proud of, Lonny. Your father is a good man, I bet your mother came from good stock too. That tells me for a fact that you are a good lad. It's in your blood, you have no choice. Whether you carry on the pride of the Fischer name, that is entirely up to you. But you have the roots.”

“Well...” Lonny scuffed a toe on the floor, then brightened, “If things turn out like we talked about at supper, I'll be proud.”



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Preston noticed that staring at Lonny Fischer had caught on with the line-up of wallflowers. "It's time to start being proud right now Lonny. A man has no greater asset than himself... Now, why don't you go ask one of those pretty girls to dance with you?"

Diamond's didactic comments bolstered the youth's confidence. He grinned, "Maybe I'll just do that."

"Remember this, Lonny: It is not what people think of you. It's what you think of them."

Lonny didn't quite reach the wallflowers before one of them stepped in front of the girl who had first refused to dance with the ragged Fischer boy. "Are you ever going to ask me to dance, Lonny Fischer?" The girl tapped her foot in mock vexation.

Without looking, Diamond watched for a moment. Lonny didn't know how to dance, but had a good start on learning. The boy recognized rhythm.

Preston mingled. While talking with Carver Ward for a few minutes, the Way-cross banker, Patrick O'Malley, sidled up to join them. Preston spoke only briefly to George Kirwin who had his wife at his elbow; there was no sign of their daughter Barbara. Dexter came along and steered McBain over to a table where the sheriff's wife was seated. The sheriff, unabashedly bursting with

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pride, introduced his “bride of nearly twenty years.” Samantha's beauty was reflected in her mother's features and Preston found Edith Dexter to be a very rare and genuine personality. Mrs. Dexter's failing eyesight wasn't quite as bad as the banker had described; though her near sight prevented her from sewing a fancy stitch, she could probably poke a broom handle through a wagon hub.

Dexter excused both he and his wife when a particular tune the couple enjoyed began. Preston watched in admiration as the pair glided around the hall. Dexter, the irascible overweight sheriff, could be light on his feet when buoyed by the woman he so obviously loved. He evinced no sign of pain in his damaged hip.

Preston danced with several available young ladies. A few refused, possibly fearing his gun reputation, maybe warned off by their parents. “The stranger,” or “the gunman,” or “that McBain fella,” as Way-cross's population referred to him, obtained permission from Carver Ward and Dexter in turn, to ask their wives for the pleasure of a dance. There was an informal queue, to Preston it seemed the length of the hall, awaiting to sweep Samantha out onto the floor. Sam never found time to sit; incomparably beautiful, if Aphrodite herself appeared, she would have been runner-up.

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Near the entrance, a space opened and a miniature clamour erupted when the flamboyant Governor Rittinger surprised the masses with his attendance. Of course, the man had chosen his time perfectly: during a momentary respite for the four member band. Preston witnessed a repeat performance of the previous evening at the lounge in the Grand Hotel as the showy political figure pontifically bestowed the blessing of his presence upon everyone.

The intermission had proven propitious for Diamond as well. As he escorted Mrs. Dexter to her seat, Samantha escaped her suitors and all three arrived at the Dexters' table simultaneously. Preston and Samantha were engrossed in cheerful conversation when the music recommenced. Rittinger's smiling face came between them and he whisked the lovely lady away from a disgruntled Preston Diamond.

Preston tore his resentful gaze away from the elegant couple. Sweeping the room he noticed and ignored several meaningful glares directed his way. Quite obviously, the male contingent did not willingly accept the concept of foreign competition chatting with the Way-cross beauty queen. "Jealous fools," Diamond muttered.

The Governor hoarded the company of the lovely girl for two dances before giving her up to Preston. Had he been paying closer attention, the

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Way-cross stranger would have noticed a decided drop in temperature within the dance hall as he and Samantha gracefully whirled around the room. The couple must have saved their very best for this opportunity. Folks who were not fraught with envy, stopped to stare; several actually gawked; Mrs. Dexter, her vision sufficient to follow them, positively beamed with pride as the handsome man and beautiful lady commanded the floor. The musicians took note as well for they quite deliberately smoothed the rough and rusty edges, presenting a polished piece of music beyond their capability. The quartet obligingly ran two more songs into a medley. Partners bowed out, others stepped in, but Preston and Samantha danced alone. Their eyes locked, their bodies moved as one, their feet left the ground and they danced on air.

An instant or an eternity? Time played second fiddle.

The ring of hopefuls closed in. Snatching Samantha from Diamond's hands, they kept her on the floor until the musicians played the last waltz. The belle of the ball had reserved this one for Bradley McBain.

Samantha asked McBain to join the Dexter family during the buffet lunch. While Mrs. Dexter

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bubbled with energy, Moody was uncharacteristically mute throughout the meal. Samantha surprised them both by inviting McBain to the ranch tomorrow for Sunday dinner.

Preston accepted.

The crowd began to thin as folks ventured out to their rigs or down to the livery for their horses. Preston purposely marked two or three young men who had become openly belligerent toward him. They had been spoiling for a fight, probably fuelling their courage with rot-gut out behind someone's wagon. No doubt, for Preston had seen this more than once in the past, the boys would be waiting for him when he exited the hall. He sighed; it had been such a fine evening.

McBain waited until the Dexter family had taken their leave before making his way to the school-hall entrance. He didn't wish for Samantha to see his fighting side again. Following along the wall so as not to be observed by someone on the outside peering in through the door, Preston neared the exit. Just as Carver Ward put his hat on, Diamond stepped close behind him and slipped through the lantern lit doorway on the heels of the big rancher. Two steps outside, Preston vanished behind a team and wagon that had been drawn up

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to the school, presently loading up with, well, a wagon load, of boisterous laughing people. Two sleeping youngsters were passed up from hands below to hands above.

Eyes quickly adjusting to the darkness, Diamond padded silently through the dew soaked grass until he located the toughs —there were three of them— who had ventured too close to the edge of abusive. They were concealed, or so they believed, behind a fancy high-top buggy. Undetected, Preston eased into their midst.

“Where the hell is that goddamn cowboy? You sure he didn't come out before us, Johnny?”

“No, damn it! I seen 'im in there after Sheriff Dexter and that good lookin' daughter of his come out.”

There was a slosh of liquid, a quite audible glugging sound, then a third voice said, “God! That Sam Dexter, she sure is a looker! I'd like to...”

“Who are we looking for?” McBain interrupted in a hoarse whisper.

The trio shared an instant of perplexity then jumped away in unison. The man with the rot-gut tripped and fell, the whisky bottle flying from his grasp. He was the only one to respond. “Well, I guess we was lookin' for you,” he said embarrassedly, climbing unsteadily to his feet.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

McBain spoke amicably. "Trust me," he said, "you don't want anything to do with a guy like me."

The man belonging to the first voice said, "If you weren't wearing that damn Colt, we'd..."

Voice two said, "Shut-up, Johnny! He ain't wearin' no gun... at least not one that I can see."

A silent stand-off electrified the air briefly. The drunken cowboy shifted to retrieve his bottle, nearly lost balance, then straightened up swaying slightly. "You been fair here with us, McBain. You could've pistol-whipped us all and never said a word. So I reckon we best mosey off a piece and leave you alone. Three agi'n one sticks in my gullet anyway."

At that moment the owners of the buggy arrived. Without further discussion, the would-be toughs and McBain went their separate ways.

Strolling back to the hotel Preston reviewed the rather eventful day: Time spent with the Fischers had been worthwhile —Diamond appreciated the opportunity to work with hand tools other than a shooting iron— the warm recollection of Luke Fischer settling into the saddle brought a smile to Preston's face; possibly, if plans materialized, the visit would have lasting positive effects for Luke, Lonny and Preston.

The social gathering, owing to Samantha's presence, had turned out to be thoroughly

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enjoyable. Diamond had been surprised to see Governor Rittinger at the community dance. Maybe the politician felt compelled to make a social appearance, although Preston couldn't guess why. Perhaps the Governor had no companion for this evening. His visit to the hall had been brief and the man only danced with a few ladies other than Samantha Dexter. Preston noted that none of Rittinger's dance partners resembled the lady he'd seen in the hotel doorway during the storm.

Diamond's thoughts returned again to the intoxicating beauty he had held in his arms on the dance floor. Tomorrow he would be seeing her again. Sunday seemed a long way off though it was almost midnight. More than he wanted to admit, Preston looked forward to her company.

All-in-all, he concluded, it had been a very good day.

The Chief's huge bulk loomed in front of him.



## *Chapter 15*

With disregard for her finery, Samantha assisted her father in unharnessing the team. While Dexter tossed a fork full of hay over the fence rails, his daughter turned the pair loose in a large holding corral. Two saddle horses in the confinement nickered greetings then turned their attention to the roughage.

“You seem quite taken by that McBlaine character,” Moody Dexter mused as he and his step-daughter walked across the starlit yard to their home. A heavy dew soaked the grass and the pair circumvented several puddles from the previous night's downpour. “*McBain*, Dad. His name is McBain.”

“Yes... so he tells me. Do you really believe that is the handle his folks gave him? There is a whole lot more to that jasper than either one of us has seen.”

Samantha conceded, “Brad never really divulged any personal information when I talked to

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him during our supper at the Grand. He didn't withhold anything, in fact he talked quite freely. It was only after I came home and thought about it that I realized he had told me nothing about his past or even what he does for a living."

"That stranger is too slick, too smooth. An' he's so fast with that pistol of his, I can't imagine him not bein' in trouble with the law somewheres along the line."

"Have you any dodgers or information to support that?" Samantha asked, rather sharply.

They had reached the house; Dexter paused, rubbed his chin in thought; then reached for his tobacco and began the very deliberate, painstaking effort of rolling a smoke while Samantha held her impatience in check, studying his countenance from the fanlight above the door.

"Weeelll," her father struck a match with his thumb nail, the flare illuminating his face which appeared softer and less haggard this evening. "Weeelll," he repeated as he inhaled, "I've sent a few telegrams and checked all my wanted posters... No one has ever seen or heard of Bradley McBlaine or Bradley McBain."

With an audible release of breath Samantha said, "Maybe he is a lawman too. How do you know he isn't here looking for someone? Perhaps Brad is a US Marshall or something?"

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

“Can't be,” Dexter argued. “Those law-dogs don't hide their stars. They have 'em polished up and tacked up there on those pigeon chests so obvious, your Momma, even with her poor eyesight, could see 'em coming from here to Way-cross... No, he ain't no Marshall; at least no regular lawman.”

“But,” Dexter said, “just how interested are you in this drifter?”

Samantha felt her face grow warmer and hoped her step-father wouldn't see her blushing in the pale light. “Weeelll,” she mimicked, “I ain't gonna lie to ya; I'd kinda like to know more 'bout 'im.”

Moody threw back his head and laughed. “You do beat all, my girl! Only I don't want you gittin' hurt by some no-account.”

“He isn't no-account, Dad. From his speech you can tell he's educated; he has manners none of the Way-cross rowdies could even fathom; he's handsome, cultured, fashionable... maybe he is an upstanding man of wealth and prominence...”

“Could be, could be,” Dexter agreed. “He's likeable in some ways; tends to grow on ya. But I caution you, dear: never judge a man just by the clothes he wears.”

Samantha lifted the latch and eased the door open. “I'll be careful, Dad.” She smiled, then preceded him into the lantern-lit kitchen.

To Preston's recollection, on the few occasions he had studied the Chief, he had never presented a cunning or intelligent side. Probably, back in the genetic make up, the fellow possessed the instincts of a hunter, but this meeting did not require inherent predator and prey sense. At the moment, Diamond did not dwell on the question of whether encountering The Chief was an accident or strategic planning. The big man stood in the centre of the boardwalk, his huge bulk allowing no room for passage on either side. The perpetual sneering smile gave no indication that the man had been waiting for Preston Diamond in particular. No doubt, any late passer-by would have run afoul of his brutal nature.

Preston gave no indication he had not been looking for the Chief.

Without breaking stride, Diamond focused the combined force of his momentum, muscle and body weight into a vicious reverse punch to the midriff. Putrid breath, reeking of stale whiskey gushed out of the flattened face. The Chief doubled, over retching and clutching at his midsection. Diamond spun round facing his injured opponent.

“Stay out of my way, Chief,” he advised in a cautionary tone.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Still bent over in apparent agony, The Chief's left hand flashed up from his belly to reach behind his neck. The silver flash of the hidden blade glinted as he brought his hand forward in a calculated throwing action. Before the arm could straighten, Preston's right foot, clad in a soft leather dress shoe, caught the elbow on the point of the funny bone sending a not-so-funny shock down the giant forearm and wrist. A furious grunt of pain issued from the breed as the force of the kick drove the arm upward; numbed, powerless fingers released the weapon. The knife traversed a graceful arc high into the air and struck blade-first in a wagon rut out in the street.

With surprising agility the breed silently launched himself at Preston. Huge sweeping arms reached to engulf the smaller man. The Chief's infamous, body crushing bear-hug had never failed him. Any man who fell within that grasp had only a few seconds —maybe a minute, if The Chief felt benevolent or needed to prolong the pleasure— in which to review his lifetime. Preston backpeddled, teetering along the edge of the raised boardwalk; shifting left, he reversed direction, ducking forward under the monstrous limb. As the Chief's arm swept above him, Diamond seized the wrist in both hands, spun about and wrenched the arm around behind the attacker's back. This

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accelerated the breed's rush, sending him somersaulting off the boardwalk to collide with a hitching rail. The impact shattered the near post but the giant regained his feet while still moving.

His breathing rattled in wretched gasps. His sides heaved like a foundered horse on the verge of collapse. Blood seeped from a gash on his forehead and the numbed left arm sagged at the elbow. The Chief glared with sneering malevolence.

There was no sign of quitting, but he desperately needed second wind.

Preston said, "You don't remember me, Chief."

It was not a question.

No answer came, so Preston continued. "Remember the fight you had on a Missouri riverboat when you lost a fistful of money in a rigged poker game? The game didn't involve me, but you were sour about the cards and wanted to kill someone to soothe your temper. I happened to be handy."

The battered breed offered no comment.

"To be honest, I thought I had killed you that night. It was dark though and hard to tell for sure. The way you went over-board and got tangled up in the paddle-wheel should have left you dead... I'm the man who flattened your face...."

With a bellow of rage, The Chief charged.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Coincidentally, the building with the broken hitching post outside was Russell Frost's Funeral Parlour. Doc Stohl, after pronouncing the giant half-breed dead, stood by as the mortician and Preston Diamond lugged the grotesque body into the shop.

The doctor was audibly grumpy for having been woken up. Preston was extremely weary and ached in more muscles than he realized he had. Undertaker Russell Frost's expressionless face remained deadpan. No one had bothered to fetch the sheriff.

The few Way-cross residents who witnessed the midnight battle would not soon forget its duration and ferocity. Several of the spectators were wakened by the commotion, half a dozen others who were late departing the dance hall encountered the scuffle while walking home. Both combatants were recent arrivals to the town so no one took a side or attempted to interfere. The smaller man known as McBain had his hands full, fighting the monstrous ogre who had been making town folk, especially women, uncomfortable for the past couple of days.

The people noted that McBain had a style of fighting quite unfamiliar in these parts. The man fought equally well with feet or fists. He dodged

*C. C. Phillips*

and shifted effortlessly, struck with punishing precision and moved so fast it was often difficult to follow. The Chief, clumsy by comparison, had incredible strength and stamina. He seemed impervious to the onslaught delivered from his insignificant opponent. The battery of blows drew copious amounts of blood; eyes swelled shut, lips split and teeth jarred loose but the half-breed stayed on his feet, swatting, grasping, clutching at the shadow of the demon who struck and landed, always beyond the reach of those huge murderous hands.

The brawl went up and down the littered street; through the dried, mud-caked ruts, into filthy puddles of muck and manure; around a horse water trough. A lamp post fell in the melee, igniting splashes of Kerosene fires in the avenue. Curses, grunts of pain and roars of rage issued from the breed. McBain remained silent though his breathing began to sound tortured, desperate.

The smaller man's kicks and punches seemed to lose their power. He was visibly fading. The Chief, an indestructible hulk, continued to absorb the punishment, kept pressing in, grasping for the one chance to end it all: the evil and definite death grip that would crush his opponent's rib cage, snapping the spine like a stick of kindling.



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

The struggle returned to its point of origin. The breed, barrel chest heaving, body swaying with fatigue, stumbled over the fallen rail of the hitching post, sprawling flat on his back in the horse dung. He lay inert, panting heavily.

McBain, obviously on the point of collapse, gulped coarse ragged breaths. Maintaining his distance he watched the prone man....

Was it over?

Cat-quick, the giant regained his feet; in his big left fist flashed the fallen knife he had lost at the onset of the struggle. The jaundiced light of the street lamp exaggerated the murderous glint of triumph flashing in the dark eyes.

The gallery stood motionless in gruesome, silent anticipation. McBain would be eviscerated before their eyes.

The half-breed made no sound as he rushed in for the kill. In a split-second border-roll, the knife flipped from the injured left into his right hand, allowing crucial additional reach.

McBain shifted a half-step forward and launched himself in a colossal twisting leap high in the air. As his feet came level with The Chief's head, a strange, powerful cry, a summons from hell, rent the night. Mid scream, McBain's right foot struck just below the giant's left ear. In the dying echoes of the demonic curse, a dull, ominous crunch issued audible finality.

*C. C. Phillips*

The Chief's neck snapped, his huge head lolled to one side as he sank to his knees then toppled forward in a bloody, deformed heap.

## *Chapter 16*

During the fracas, Preston Diamond had refrained from drawing the Remington even though the breed had twice attacked with a knife. He now lay the weapon on a small table beside the big claw-footed bath tub Frank Collier had filled with warm water; the hotel's boiler system had cooled to lukewarm by this time of night. The efficient clerk also added a generous helping of magnesium salts. No one bothered Diamond as he half-dozed, letting the strain and pain seep from his tired body. His fists and feet were swollen and sore. Ugly bruises turned his forearms black and blue from blocking the ham fisted punches and clumsy but brutal swings of The Chief. There were numerous scrapes and gashes. Doc Stohl had resentfully offered to stitch one of the larger tears where the skin had broken but Preston felt too weary to withstand the remonstrations of the medical man.

The water had cooled to room temperature when Diamond stirred. From a small medical kit

*C. C. Phillips*

Frank Collier had provided, Preston attended to his open wounds. Once the blood had been washed away none of the abrasions were as serious as they had first appeared. The injured man winced, biting his lip to fight the stinging pain from iodine he poured on the cuts. The disinfectant left a red-brown stain on his skin. Preston tied a small bandage over the wound along his left forearm. The ministrations required extra time as he fumbled with swollen hands and fingers. Satisfied, he wrapped himself in a large towel, picked up the Remington and padded down the hall to his room.

Full daylight streamed through the hotel room window when Diamond awakened next morning. Slowly he climbed out of the luxurious bed. A yawn and stretch did not hurt so bad as he had feared. Swelling in his feet and hands had subsided; he flexed his fingers, paying special attention to the index on his right hand. The ritual combat program lacked his usual fervour, but Preston, clad in summer underwear, stubbornly went through the paces, feeling loosened and relaxed when finished.

A maid knocked on the door, delivering the hotel guest's freshly laundered clothes. These Preston inspected, noting that a rent in the trousers had been repaired with minute precision. He reattached the special accoutrements necessary for his trade then dressed carefully. He opened the

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

trunk and swapped the Remington revolver in its hide-out holster, for the .45 Colt. After buckling on the gun belt he tried several fast draws. To the average professional, Diamond's speed would be remarkable; he felt sluggish. But the gun fit his hand and the index digit slid smoothly inside the trigger guard.

A second knock on the door interrupted his practise.

“McBlaine, are you in there? It's Sheriff Dexter.”

In answer, Bradley McBain opened the door.

“Mornin', McBlaine,” Dexter drawled. “I'd like you to come down to the office as soon as you can.”

“Working Sundays now, Sheriff?” McBain queried as he stepped out into the hallway.

The sheriff grunted, “Seems lately, I just can't get no peace... An' ever' time I git called to town, I find that you are at the bottom of it.”

“No arrest today, though?” McBain asked.

“Not yet... maybe tomorrow. My daughter has plans for you this afternoon.”

McBain surmised that Moody Dexter did not intend to be in town for long this morning

*C. C. Phillips*

because his saddled horse stood idly swatting flies at the hitching rail in front of the sheriff's office. Dexter pushed open the door and McBain followed him inside.

Dexter gestured toward a seat for his guest, flopped in his own chair behind the oak desk and reached for his makings. "So you killed that goddamn breed last night..."

McBain waited.

"Killed the brute with your bare hands... and boots, if the rumour is near to bein' accurate. Judgin' by the size of the man, I'd say that was a mighty tall order."

"The Chief was waiting for me as I walked back to the hotel after leaving the dance." McBain shrugged, "He didn't appear predisposed to let me past; so I opened the ball."

Dexter blew out a cloud of smoke. "You opened the ball? I'd say you opened the ball, supplied the orchestra and then proceeded to waltz up and down the main street of this town for an hour."

McBain sighed. "I would have willingly given up my dance partner, but no one offered to cut-in."

"Doc says you broke the big bugger's neck. Witnesses say you flew up in the air and kicked his head right off. They're sayin' a lot of things an' I can't nearly believe the half of it."

McBain assumed a pained expression. “I cannot tell you what the witnesses saw. I was quite involved and didn't have time to stand back watching myself.”

Dexter grasped a thick sheaf of papers and tossed them across the desk. “Since he arrived, I be'n making some inquiries about that jasper... Turns out, quite a few concerned citizens throughout the western territories are willing to pay for bringin' him to justice...” The sheriff reached out and reclaimed one of the documents. “‘Dead Or Alive', it says here.”

McBain rose and leafed through the pile of dodgers. A sketch of a female caught his attention and he studied it briefly. In an obscure fashion, the face reminded him of the Clarkston school teacher, Sarah Dickens. “Your filing could use an update... many of these criminals are already serving time, or they are dead.” He added with a wry grin, “You don't have any with my picture on... I'll bet my horse and saddle, you've been looking.”

Dexter ignored the barb. “Close to two thousand dollars reward; I added 'em up myself.”

“I'm not a bounty hunter but have them send the money to O'Malley's bank. I plan to open an account there.”

Dexter looked up in disbelief, “What? Are you plannin' on becoming a perm'nent resident of Way-cross?”

*C. C. Phillips*

“Not Way-cross proper... I want to buy your ranch.”

McBain retrieved his horse from the livery stable and rode out to the Dexter place along with the sheriff. As they trotted the horses among the cottonwoods Dexter gazed across the fence at his beloved Herefords. “I s'ppose Carver Ward would buy my cows if you or someone else does eventually buy my outfit.” He sighed.

McBain shifted in the saddle and followed Moody's gaze. “If we can reach an agreement, I'll buy you out lock, stock and barrel.”

The landowner gave a non-committal shrug. “This is moving faster than I had anticipated. Better break the news to Sam an' Edith. They'll have something to say, I can assure you.”

“Er... do Samantha and your wife know about the fight I had last night? I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable; I know how some folks feel about me...” he amended, “well, what they perceive as my kind.”

“The girls heard part of the story. Doc Stohl drove out to relay the news.” Dexter shook his head, “They both seemed more concerned about your damned health than the fact that you kicked a man to pieces.”

At the ranch, Dexter off-saddled and turned his mount loose in the corral. He instructed his



guest to tie the gelding in the barn as the Dexter's had a harness mare with a mean streak toward newcomers. The horse McBain purchased from Ol' Ross no longer showed any inclination of fighting the halter shank and stood quietly in the stall as McBain loosened the cinches.

The ranch exuded quietude as the two men strolled across the yard to the log house. McBain could feel the homeliness of the little spread. Smoke from the cook stove issued from the chimney. "Mother will have it hot in the kitchen today," Moody observed.

Both ladies' faces were warm and flushed from the heat as they greeted the new arrival. McBain hung his hat and holster on a peg in imitation of Dexter. Samantha instantly noticed a gash along his forehead; the iodine stain making it more livid. She made a fuss insisting on applying salve to the sore area. McBain objected half-heartedly, eventually succumbing to the unaccustomed tenderness.

What passed as Sunday dinner at the Dexters would serve as a banquet in most households. McBain embarrassed himself but pleased the cooks with his terrific appetite. He hadn't eaten since the lunch at the dance and the hour long workout with The Chief had burned up any energy reserve in his lean body. He stretched his own rule of not overindulging.

*C. C. Phillips*

Samantha and her mother bustled about clearing the table after the meal. McBain kept up a lively discussion with the women while Dexter chewed thoughtfully on a toothpick. At length the sheriff delved in his pocket for his makings, twisted a quiry and touched a match to it. Timing the moment perfectly, during a lull in the conversation, he cleared his throat in the manner of someone desiring to have the floor.

“Mr. McBain here, is offerin' to buy our ranch,” he announced.

Silence.

The female contingent searched the faces of first one then the other of the two men. A twenty-five year age difference did nothing to conceal the mother-daughter similarity as a gamut of emotions ranging from astonishment to disbelief were reflected in their eyes.

Samantha found her voice first. “You want to buy our place, Brad?”

“Well, only if it is for sale. I cannot imagine how you could give this up to move into town.”

“It's for Mother,” Dexter said.

“It's for Allan,” Mrs. Dexter said.

“It is for them both,” Samantha explained. “Doctor Stohl says Dad has a bad heart; the work

on the ranch and his sheriff duties are too much for a man his age. Mother's eyes are not so good anymore and she shouldn't be out here alone all day."

Her father interjected, "I'm not too old, I'm too fat."

Edith Dexter smiled. "We shall have to think about moving sooner or later, I fear. No one wants to leave..."

"You wouldn't have to leave until you are ready. As for myself, I will not be living here; not on a permanent basis."

Dexter argued, "But you said you might buy the cattle too... Who will look after the Herefords if you ain't gonna be around?"

McBain spread his hands. "Please don't think me presumptuous, but I have made some inquiries. I had to investigate certain arrangements, certain possibilities, before making you an offer. If you want to sell now and move later, I'll build a house; living-quarters for a couple of fellows I can hire to run the ranch."

Samantha paled. "But we don't want to live here with strangers moving into our yard!" she protested.

A light of realization dawned in Dexter's eyes. He held up a big hand. "Wait a minute, Sam, I don't think he has strangers in mind, do you, McBain?"

*C. C. Phillips*

“No, they aren't strangers, Moody. They are a fine and capable pair of gentlemen... Luke and Lonny Fischer.”

The Dexter family and McBain discussed options and possibilities, but they avoided the topic of price. The Dexter's were surprised by, and unprepared for, the sudden development and they would need time to decide amongst themselves. Dexter probably had a figure in mind for the ranch itself, but he would have to do, “a fair bit of calc'latin” as he worded it, to come up with an exact value for “the whole shebang.”

The sun was approaching mid afternoon when Samantha invited Bradley McBain for a guided tour of the place. She did not protest when he strapped on his gun belt before leaving the house. Samantha first showed him around the corrals and the outbuildings. He checked the gelding when they went through the barn. The fresh hay in the loft teased his nostrils with its redolence. The Dexters kept seven horses: three for saddle and four broke to harness. Preston found the machinery (a mower, bunch rake, hay rack, sturdy low-bed sleigh, 60 bushel farm wagon, buckboard, buggy and cutter) to be in good repair, like the rest of the ranch; Moody Dexter was fastidious with his equipment. Samantha then led McBain out to the pasture and hay meadow. An

imperceptible breeze rustled the leaves as the pair walked beneath the cottonwoods along the creek. The water ran muddy and more furious than usual due to up-stream flooding brought on by the heavy rain. Preston caught a whiff of the perfume Samantha wore. The fragrance was vaguely familiar, though he hadn't noticed it at the dance.

“That is a lovely scent you are wearing,” He complimented.

Samantha smiled. “Thank-you... My helper, Matilda Frye, gave it to me a few weeks ago when she returned from visiting her daughter.” Samantha blushed when she added, “Matilda said it would help me attract a man.”

McBain laughed. “Judging by the line-up of suitors at the dance last night, I would have thought you needed a repellent!”

Then he added casually, “How long has Mrs. Frye been working with you, Samantha?”

Sam put her head to one side as she considered. “Um, I think it is about fourteen months now. Matilda is a godsend. She is a hard worker, fast, and turns out excellent quality. She even helps with my account records.”

Grass grew lush, a vibrant green. A host of wild flowers nodded lazily in the meadow. Dozing Herefords lay chewing their cuds in the shade of the big trees. McBain commented that he admired Moody for having the foresight to initiate the small

*C. C. Phillips*

scale breeding program. The light of love for her step-father showed in the lady's eyes as she talked about Moody Dexter; his pride in the valuable herd; his fastidious up-keep on the ranch.

Unabashed, Samantha slipped her arm through Preston's. On a secluded grassy bank she stopped, her body growing tense, almost rigid. A silent warning clicked in Preston's brain as he anxiously watched her staring vacantly, eyes unfocused, across a hay field beyond the stream. He began to wonder what she was thinking when, at last, she turned, grasped his hand in both of hers and looked deep into his eyes. In a low, urgent tone, she said, "I... I've never been with a man... The trouble in Boston has made... made me fearful to be alone with anyone other than my parents... I... I know... I...."

Preston Diamond took her in his arms and held her to him. She sobbed silently. Huge tears trickled down her cheeks and he felt their wetness on his shoulder. Though his hands were bruised and swollen, their touch was soft and gentle as he caressed her long blonde hair.

Samantha raised her lips to his ear, "I want you to make love to me."

Preston did not rush the lady. Tender, reassuring, he allowed her every opportunity to change her mind. He lay beside her on the cool, carpet of grass, her beautiful cream-white skin

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

accentuated by the flickering dappled shade cast by the shimmering leaves above. Diamond caught his breath; surely nothing in heaven or on Earth could compare to this beauty... this loveliness... perfection. His hands, his lips, explored her body. She shivered and sighed with pleasure as he touched her where no one had ever touched her before.

He made love to her.

And she cried softly while he held her close when it was over.

Naked, Preston rose to his feet and gazed down upon the lovely goddess; a bare arm shielded her eyes from the sunlight. Was she sleeping? Fascinated, riveted by her beauty, he fought a wild desire to take her in his arms again; to make passionate love to her; to tell her he loved her for all eternity. Instead, Preston turned away, concealing his arousal. He tried to concentrate on a doe and two fawns at the far edge of the field.

A metallic “snick” echoed loudly on the stillness.

Preston Diamond let his guard down.

He shifted around slowly. Samantha had risen to a sitting position on the grass, her legs crossed in Indian fashion. Both her hands clutched the butt of McBain's heavy .45; it was pointed at his chest, the hammer eared back. Her eyes were vacant, fathomless pools; dead. She spoke in a

*C. C. Phillips*

strange, empty voice that came from her lips but seemed to originate an eternity away. “I must kill you for what you have done. I shall say that you raped me and I shot you. No one will ever doubt the word of Samantha Dexter.”

She squeezed the trigger.



## *Chapter 17*

*Click.*

The hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Preston expected Samantha to continue firing the gun, but she simply stared at the weapon, a puzzled frown on her face. When she turned her gaze to him, Preston saw that her eyes were once again sparkling and alive. “Why do I have your gun in my hand?” she asked. “Did you put it there?”

The expression of puzzlement was contagious but Preston quickly recovered. “No... No, I just asked you to hand it to me... I guess you didn't hear me clearly.”

A faint smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she passed him the Colt. “Do you always turn to your gun after making love to a woman?”

*C. C. Phillips*

What could he say? I like to celebrate by firing off a few shots in the air? I feel naked without it? Preston opted to change the subject. “Perhaps your folks will be wondering what became of us.”

Samantha flashed a smile. “Dad may be stewing, but Mother knows exactly what we're doing.”

Incredulity rang in Preston's voice. “Your mother knows we've been making love?”

“Not for sure, but she is a good guesser. And I can't hide anything from her... poor vision or not.”

“Isn't our return going to be... er... well... embarrassing?”

Samantha reached for her clothes. “Let's go find out!”

While the lady attended to hygiene at the water's edge, Preston dressed and strapped on the gun belt. He dug the six cartridges from his pocket and thumbed them into the cylinder of the revolver. He shook his head as he holstered the weapon. What had, for want of a better word, possessed the girl?

Samantha returned and he helped her arrange hair and clothing so as not to appear in

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

obvious disarray. She laughed at his concern and kissed him lightly on the cheek, "I was already a big girl when we made love, now you have made me a woman. There is no shame in that."

"Then there is no shame in this either," he retorted, taking her in his arms and kissing her passionately on the lips.

She broke off the embrace, caught her breath, and touched a hand to his cheek. "We best be going or Sheriff Dad will have his posse out after us."

Samantha lay awake staring out at the triangle of star lit sky she could see through her bedroom window. Sleep waited in the shadows as her mind churned through an olio of thoughts and doubts. It had been a momentous day. She harboured no regret. Brad had opened a door she could never have opened on her own and she knew he affected her more than anyone she had ever known... He had driven away the haunting terror of the night Lenore was murdered; given Samantha the courage to live; to love.

Did she love Bradley McBain? Thinking of him made her heart beat faster and she looked forward to seeing him; is that love or simply infatuation? Could she fall in love with someone she had known for less than a week? How do you even know when you are in love? The intimacy

*C. C. Phillips*

they had shared in the cool grass on the bank above the creek went far beyond description; beyond imagination; with proper nourishment, that must certainly lead to love...

The solitary debate continued. Sleep was patient, it could wait all night.

On the other hand... did he feel the same way about her? Bradley McBain must have been with many women in his lifetime. Was Samantha Dexter to become just another lady he had known? Would he move on, she a fading memory? She knew nothing about him; his past, his work... absolutely nothing. Yet she asked him to make love to her. Why did she do that?

There was something else... sometimes, in his presence, her mind went blank. Moments were blotted out. Could his being near, actually, physically, force her heart to skip a few beats? Was she blacking out, losing her mind? She didn't feel faint or have a headache when regaining her senses. On two occasions this afternoon there were moments, actions, for which she could not account. Did time stand still? When she stopped on the little rise above the creek she remembered looking across the water, then... nothing. The empty pause seemed brief and she would not have thought of it

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

again, but Brad was staring at her with a look of deep concern on his face. Later she found the revolver in her hand. How did it get there? Brad's expression did not match the explanation he gave.

Samantha yawned and queried the stars;  
“What is happening? What is wrong with me?”

Sleep passed a gentle hand over heavy eyelids, turning torment to pleasant dreams of love's embrace, erasing the recurring nightmare of Boston Common.

And Samantha Dexter awoke in love.

Monday morning Sheriff Dexter sat behind his desk scribbling the finishing touches on the last of the reports he had started the previous week. The pencil stub had shrunk and dark streaks from excess lead had marred the brief account that would, until misplaced or destroyed, be the only pages history would have to remark the passing of Muley Trippett and Kenny Lester. A less lengthy message, Dexter's report on the first two Lester brothers to die last week, had been forwarded to Mayor George Kirwin's part-time clerk. That document would now be lost in the bottom of the apple crate filing cabinet. It wasn't much to mark a man's lifetime.

*C. C. Phillips*

The door opened silently and Bradley McBain stepped into the sheriff's office. Dexter glanced up, grunted, "Hello," and continued writing.

"Well, Sheriff, your enchanting voice certainly fills the air this morning," McBain goaded.

Sheriff Dexter ignored the jibe. He wrote furiously for another minute then tossed the pencil aside. "There!" he exclaimed, flourishing the two pages of scribble. "I've finished the reports on Muley and Lester's shooting."

"How can you be finished Muley's report? You don't know who shot him yet?"

"This is just a write-up for Mayor Kirwin. Nobody cares about who done it."

"You'll make another report when the murderer is apprehended?" McBain asked.

"Could be; don't know who would read it though... unless the matter goes to trial. Mind, if you are still around when the guy shows up, there won't be no trial. You have a habit of bein' judge, jury and executioner, all rolled into one handy package.

"An' speaking of you bein' the executioner, word got out down the wire — apparently someone goaded the rail-road boys into sendin' a message on Sunday— that The Chief was killed. That breed is mighty well known and plenty feared throughout a

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

considerable chunk of this country. Some dude, some writer guy, from back east caught wind and is acomin' out here for interviews. He telegraphed Russell Frost sayin' to keep the body above ground 'cause they want a passel of pictures."

McBain shrugged. "I don't have time for interviews nor do I pose for pictures."

Dexter persisted, "Them reporter guys will hound you to hell. They don't quit easy."

"You will have to give the reporter the story, Sheriff. And make certain he understands I want no truck with him. Tell him... tell him it is for his own well being."

Dexter switched the conversation. "My girls and I talked pretty late last night. We agreed we should sell the ranch while there is a buyer available. We've never had much, and who knows? Tough winters or dry years could wipe us out; then Edith and I would have nothing for our old age..." Moody's eyes became moist. "We'd like to stay on at the place for awhile yet —like you said we could — God knows it will be hard for us to leave..."

McBain smiled. "You can stay there forever, Moody. And, if you so desire, providing I don't go first, I'll bury you on the place."

*C. C. Phillips*

Dexter swallowed the lump growing in his throat. "You'll be wantin' to know the price... We don't got an exact figure but I can tell you it will be slightly more'n double the bounty on the half-breed's head. How does that suit you?"

"Sounds reasonable; I'll make arrangements with the banker." Reaching across the desk McBain shook Dexter's hand: for men of the calibre, an agreement more binding than a signature.

Preston Diamond strode along the boardwalk to the brick and mortar structure that served as Way-cross Bank. Two saddled horses bearing signs of a long trail were tied at the hitching rail shared by the financial establishment and the neighbouring town hall. O'Malley had clients or visitors in his office so Preston took a seat near the barred window in the foyer. The building was of sturdy construction. His eye for carpentry noted renovations had been performed recently. The original trim, likely painted fir, had been replaced with beautifully stained oak. The mop boards, quarter round and wainscot glistened with a diligent polishing. A patterned oak trim enclosed the entire room along the top of the walls



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abutting the ceiling. The hardwood floor was oak of a darker stain. This same colour and grain framed the wooden structure of the two teller cages and a long flat counter.

A male clerk, a younger version of Patrick O'Malley (this one having a full head of hair) waited on an elderly lady who was quite hard of hearing. A second clerk, a friendly young lady with dark eyes and a pretty smile, worked at a large desk behind the main counter. Preston had noticed her before he sat down. Both tellers had been present during his previous visit.

The door, advertising the stencilled word 'MANAGER' above the name 'PATRICK O'MALLEY' opened and Diamond glanced in that direction as the banker showed two travel-stained but well-dressed gentlemen from his office. Preston immediately shifted his gaze, ostensibly fixating on the elderly customer who had completed her business and was, with the aid of a cane, shuffling toward the exit. One of the gentlemen held the door for the old woman, then both followed her out of the bank.

They were the men who had first come to visit Herman Goldman, the now deceased banker, in Clarkston.

*C. C. Phillips*

Preston watched O'Malley watching the two strangers. Nothing could be read in his expression. O'Malley saw McBain and smiled a welcome. "You're here to see me, Mr. McBain? Please come in; have a seat."

The money man gave no indication that he had been troubled by the strangers' visit.

O'Malley applauded the decision and welcomed the soon-to-be new resident to Way-cross when McBain announced that he and Dexter had come to an agreement. McBain stated that he would like to open an account in Way-cross and have O'Malley's people handle the transaction. Also, drawn from the new account, there would be a monthly salary payment made to Luke and his son, Lonny Fischer.

O'Malley smiled broadly, "We heard about you putting Luke back on a horse. Even if Luke won't be able to work cattle anymore, he has his pride back. That goes a long way for a man like him."

"Lonny is my concern," McBain countered. "A boy needs a fair chance... just like you've given your son, Mr. O'Malley."

Diamond checked the reaction but could not be definite. Did the banker's eyes reveal a fleeting fear or uncertainty? The instant passed but a

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

perceptible note of apprehension rang in his voice when O'Malley replied, "Yes, it is our hope, the wife and I, that David and Melissa can take over our business some day. We...."

He broke off as McBain rose from his chair and turned to the window. The bank manager stared in consternation as his customer quietly studied the street.

Preston noted the two horses were gone from the hitching rail. He thought of Herman Goldman and wondered if he could have prevented his murder. Reaching a decision, he turned back to O'Malley. "Can you handle a gun?"

Completely blind-sided by this change in conversation, O'Malley spluttered, "What do you mean, handle a gun?"

"Are you familiar with firearms at all?"

"Well, yes, Mr. McBain. David and I hunt deer and elk. We are, I say in all modesty, above average with both pistol and rifle. Shooting is a hobby we share, something we can do together as father and son... but I really cannot fathom why you are asking such a question at this time."

McBain levelled his gaze, locking eyes with the bank man. "Those two men who were in here before me... they are serious trouble. Do not doubt my sincerity: I suggest you and your son go nowhere without carrying a weapon."

*C. C. Phillips*

“But.. but they were only inquiring about... about something. They issued no threat.”

O'Malley protested.

“Tell me if I am wrong... I suspect they were offering to buy your bank.” McBain held up a hand to stall protest. “They were charismatic, decent business men today. They or someone like them will be back and they will not be nice at all. You will sell or you will die.”

O'Malley paled. “How do you know this? Why should I believe you?”

McBain skirted the questions. “Are you familiar with a town by the name of Clarkston? It is about a hundred and fifty miles, as the horse trots, south-west of Way-cross.”

“Clarkston? Yes... I heard something about an attempted robbery there a few weeks back. The owner of the bank, Herman Goldman —I met him on business several years ago— was killed and the two robbers were shot by a clerk or somebody in the bank. I never actually read a newspaper account of the fiasco, just heard the rumour. As far as I know, that is the end of the story. Herman was a decent sort but we all know banks are a temptation; I hoped we would have a reprieve when Jesse James was shot back in April....”

“The Clarkston business has no connection with what may be left of the James gang, but it was more than a simple hold-up gone sour. The details

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are not open for discussion; the important issue in that crime is that the robbery was a cover-up; a ruse to hide the fact that Herman Goldman was deliberately assassinated.”

“Mr. McBain, I don't want to be rude, but there is a limit. How could you expect me to take your story as gospel? A stranger to Way-cross, you ride into town a week or so back, two dead men on the trail behind you; since then there has been a jail break; Sheriff Dexter shot the fugitive; the accomplice, after he was arrested, was murdered in his cell; Saturday night after the dance you beat a man to death —granted a vicious killer, wanted by the law— but you killed him.” The banker leaned further forward in the chair his face grew red and flecks of spittle spattered from his lips as the remonstrations progressed. “Now you come into my bank telling me to arm myself, in preparation for... for what? ...war? And I am supposed to accept that?”

McBain took his time responding allowing the money manager a moment to settle back in his seat and regain composure. “The two men who were in your office ten minutes ago had been to visit Mr. Goldman, a few weeks before he was killed. They were strongly encouraging him to sell his business.” With cold finality he added, “That, Mr. O'Malley, is gospel.”



## *Chapter 18*

Emerging from the Way-cross bank, Preston studied the main street. There were no signs of the strangers or their horses. He reasoned the logical place to start a search would be at Ol' Ross's livery barn, for the mounts had shown evidence of a hard journey.

The stable owner was using his molars — those still in his mouth— to gnaw off a corner of a plug as Diamond entered the barn. A dark trickle of tobacco juice ran down the old man's chin as a contented grin spread across his grizzled features. “Want a chew?” he asked, flourishing the foul, lint-encrusted plug.

McBain shook his head. “No thanks, Ross, I just spit some out.”

“You take the odd chew?” the hostler asked in disbelief.

“I tried a bit twenty years ago, the taste is still in my mouth.”

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Ross chuckled. "Well, I can see that you ain't primed for goin' ridin' so what can I do you out of today?"

"Oh, I was just wondering if a couple of strangers with a pair of tired horses showed up here this morning?"

"Acquaintances of yours?" Ross asked.

Preston hedged. "Not yet, but I'd like to talk to them."

The hostler rubbed his chin smearing the dried dribble of tobacco juice. "Weeeelll, I don't always supply information, but seein' as how these ain't customers, I 'll tell ya. Two duded up fellas with some dust on their horses and theyselves, hollered in the door —didn't bother to get down off them nags— to ask were the rail depot was." He laughed at his own wit, "I tol' 'em it was down by the tracks."

Several wheeled conveyances were parked and saddle horses were tied outside the railway station. The manager, Abel Stafford, barely acknowledged Diamond when he entered the freight office via a walk-through door at the rear. Probably everyone who came into the depot was treated to this reception; Preston had noted it on a previous meeting. Stafford continued to ignore the visitor while shuffling through bills-of-lading, checking them against the manifest. The only other



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occupant was a heavy-set black man of about twenty-five. He was shifting cargo, making room for the in-bound freight. The helper acknowledged Preston with a brief smile but said nothing. Preston wondered if Stafford forbid chatter inside the depot. Content to be ignored, he wandered around the crowded room observing more than his casual manner indicated. Boxes, crates, wooden barrels and kegs littered the floor space. A few pieces of merchandise awaited pick-up, but most were labelled for distant destinations down the line. Several four-wheeled handcarts were laden with more packages and various pieces of luggage. Preston memorized the tags attached to two dusty bedrolls: Dunvegan and Peel. If they belonged to the strangers he sought, it was probable the names were fictitious. Preston's eyes were attracted to two rather large, expensive pieces of luggage. He read 'Sheffield Rittinger' handwritten in large flamboyant script; the baggage indicated an eastern destination.

Diamond mused, "So the Governor is leaving Way-cross today."

A partition had been constructed creating a separate room at the far end of the freight depot. In the centre of the dividing wall a closed door with translucent glass bore the title 'TELEGRAPH

OFFICE'; the faint staccato rattle of the transmitter reached Preston's ears. A closed wicket window with thin iron bars stretched horizontally across was situated to the left of the doorway.

Through a series of adjacent windows looking out on the tracks and platform, Preston saw a small gathering of people; some sat on chairs or a long bench that paralleled the face of the building; others were standing. Occasionally one of those seated would stand up, stride to the raised edge and gaze down the twin lines of steel that vanished in the distance; passengers going out and folks awaiting the arrival of someone or an item of freight. Governor Rittinger strutted among the crowd chatting and visiting, always smiling or laughing.

Diamond espied the two men who had been in O'Malley's bank. They were apart from the crowd, at the far end, seated on the rough boards of the platform. Governor Rittinger seemed oblivious to their presence. Preston noted the butt of a holstered revolver on the man nearest him; from the angle he could not determine if the other had a weapon. Neither had been visibly armed when at the bank a short time ago.

Preston recognized the steady puff of black smoke boiling into the sky before seeing or hearing the train. Folks on the platform began to mill about in animated anticipation. Watching closely,

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Diamond soon picked out the two strangers making their way through the crowd. Indeed, both men wore revolvers at their hips. Preston noted the worn grips and the natural way the guns hung. Was there a silent acknowledgement as they passed Rittinger? The pair left the platform and were lost to sight.

Abel Stafford sighed audibly, set aside his paperwork, then proceeded to a huge set of double doors which he heaved apart. Brilliant sunshine and the clamour of the approaching train flooded the room. The doors opened onto another portion of the platform at right angles to the section visible from the window. Peering around the side of a carton, Diamond again caught sight of the strangers. They were climbing aboard the weary horses. As he studied them, one fellow, half-way into the saddle, stepped back onto the ground, passed the reins to his companion then strode in the direction of the depot. The man entered the building through the double doors, growled, "Change of plans," to Stafford and retrieved the two bedrolls from the baggage cart.

The whistle blew and the locomotive chuffed into Way-cross station. A flurry of bustle commenced as Union Pacific men, passengers (in-

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bound and out-bound)— people awaiting arrivals and freight, depot personal Stafford and his assistant, even the telegraph operator, all crowded the platform at once.

Alternately watching through the windows and the doorway, Preston marvelled at the efficiency with which the depot and rail crew quickly handled the freight and shuttled the locomotive and its cars around. Two in-bound boxcars were dropped from the train and one outbound, with livestock --probably cattle, Preston guessed, was hooked on. Cargo and baggage was off-loaded; cargo and baggage was loaded on.

Passengers disembarking were of interest to Preston. There were five visitors to Way-cross or bound, via stage coach, farther into the hinterland. One of these was, from appearance, a news reporter; probably the fellow who had sent the telegraph message concerning the death of The Chief. Even if he had not been in possession of the bulky picture box and tripod Preston would have suspected him a news person; no ink or pencil lead stains on his clothes; no writing pad and fountain pen visible; nothing material to identify his profession; the chap simply acted like someone accustomed to delving into other peoples' matters. Maybe it was his long nose.

Diamond, moving inconspicuously among the shifting freight near the wide entrance, was near

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enough to see and hear as the reporter seized Abel Stafford by the sleeve and demanded, "Where may I find the man who beat The Chief to death? Is he still in town?"

Stafford looked meaningfully at the man's hand on his arm, brushed it aside, then adjusted his deadpan gaze to the reporter's face. "The Chief is dead. What Chief?"

The new arrival found the Governor more loquacious and though Rittinger yielded no information about the midnight fight, Preston heard him express excessive interest in the camera box. Inevitably, on the station platform, the Union Pacific locomotive behind him, Governor Rittinger proudly posed for a photograph.

The echoes of the train died in the distance and the hubbub on the platform dwindled to a few people waiting to be issued their freight. Soon these people dissipated too. The telegraph key punch was back in his office; the black man shifted new boxes and crates; the agent resumed scrutiny of the paperwork; Bradley McBain made himself visible.

Abel Stafford hired on as depot manager when the railway arrived in Way-cross. Stafford had come with the tracks; he had been on the gang that laid the steel. The spur was Union Pacific's end -of-the-line and it became the-end-of-the-line for Abel as well. The company recognised

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Stafford's diligence on the road gang and, more importantly, the fact that he had an education. Into his fifties now, the man had not gone over to fat when the hard work ended. He still carried plenty of muscle though his shoulders were stooped and legs bowed from years of heavy lifting. Taciturn, surly, a loner, the agent had an air of no-nonsense about him that the unfortunate Lester brothers should have realized before they tried to rob the rail depot. He glanced up with no show of emotion when McBain silently appeared beside him.

"I hadn't heard that The Chief was dead although I knew he had come to Way- cross... You will be the man who killed him," Abel Stafford said.

McBain nodded, "He was looking for trouble; I fought back."

Stafford tossed the cargo manifest on a crate. "I knew The Chief. What is it you are here for today? The name 'McBlaine' isn't on the manifest."

"Actually it is *McBain*, the spelling was incorrect on my freight last week. I am impressed that you recall my name at all... And why do you assume I fought The Chief?"

The agent shrugged. "I don't make a habit of memorizing names. Yours stayed with me. Simple deduction told me you were the one who killed that goddamn half-breed giant..."

“And how is that?”

Another shrug. “No one in Way-cross could have done it... Now, what is it you want?”

“Information.”

“Yes,” Stafford sighed, “I guessed that too.”

Charlie Morris, no relation to the inventor, Samuel Morse, was the telegraph operator in Way-cross. From Charlie's alcove, Abel Stafford obtained two mugs of lukewarm coffee and led McBain out of the depot. The two men took up seats in the shade of the building's eave on the now vacant freight platform.

“I can't imagine what information I could have for you. Union Pacific records are strictly confidential,” Stafford advised, then added, “First off though, I would like to tell you a story...”

McBain waited while the agent took a large swallow of coffee.

“The Chief worked for a short time on a railroad gang that I was with; maybe the only time he ever did any honest labour. He was a mean and miserable bastard if God or the Devil ever made one. You can imagine McBain rail line construction is quite physically taxing and we were all tough boys then; we worked hard, we played hard. One night The Chief challenged two of the lads to what he called a “friendly” wrestling match... he killed them both with his bare hands. One of them was my younger brother.”

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Tears welled in the hard man's eyes as he looked squarely at McBain. "I wish to hell I had been able to stop him, but there was nothing any of us could do; we could as well have tried to stop the train. God, how I would have enjoyed seeing you beat that bastard to death!"

McBain consoled, "If you want to see the Chief's carcass, that reporter guy that arrived on the train is taking pictures; probably, right now."

"No, it is enough to know he is dead. And," Stafford held out his hand, "to shake the hand of the man who killed him."

McBain solemnly acknowledged the firm grip.

"I'll try to give you anything you want to hear, but I will not compromise the company."

"Maybe you won't know anything that can help me. Governor Ritterger went out on the train today, did you happen to see or hear him talking with those two gentlemen who changed their minds about leaving?"

Stafford took his time in replying. "I know who you mean, they had paid passage for themselves and two horses up to the main line. And yes, I did see them in conversation with Ritterger. They were on the platform quite a while ahead of anyone else. They talked for about fifteen minutes, I would estimate."



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“Did you hear anything they said, anything at all?”

“No, they were out here on the platform and I was inside the freight office.”

“Was it a friendly conversation? Was the Governor on parade, so-to-speak?”

“There was nothing to suggest they weren't on even terms, from what I saw, but... no, Rittinger wasn't fluffing his feathers for the crowd. He actually looked quite serious. And I mention that because in all the times I've loaded him on this train, he has never been less than overly familiar with everyone.”

“The Governor rides the train often?”  
McBain asked.

“Well... yes, he is a quite frequent passenger; maybe once a month...” Stafford reconsidered, “Probably more like twice in three months would be a better average. I don't know how long he stays in Way-cross or how far he travels by stage coach when he leaves here.”

Through the open door way the sound of the transmitter resumed. On impulse McBain asked, “Does the telegraph run twenty-four hours a day on this spur?”

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Stafford hesitated again, he did not appreciate questions that may be connected with rail-road business. "We only have the transmitter up for nine hours a day. The main line runs day and night.; Charlie is the only operator."

McBain smiled, "I have a few messages to send, I'll do that now.

"You've given me something to digest, Mr. Stafford. You may be assured none of this discussion will go any farther."

Stafford smiled, an expression foreign to his face. "Maybe I will go pay my disrespects to the half-breed. You know it is a coincidence that the heathen bastard was killed here in Way-cross, right in my own town. Thanks again, McBain... I shall sleep better knowing that Dick is avenged."

## *Chapter 19*

There were a host of questions vying for supremacy in Preston Diamond's thoughts as he travelled a circuitous route to town central: What was the connection between Rittinger and the men who had threatened Herman Goldman? Was the meeting at the depot a mere coincidence? If so, an early arrival seemed out of character for the politician; in his home territory, schedules probably accommodated him. Yet, according to Abel Stafford, the Governor had been on the platform ahead of everyone. He had discussed a subject of serious nature with the newcomers. What had they talked about? Why had the pair elected to cancel their travel plans? Were they contracted to finish the job Muley Trippett and Kenny Lester had not completed? Where were they now? He hoped his coded telegraph messages received prompt response.

Preston detected a flash of movement. Using a large tree trunk to conceal his outline, he

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faded into the foreground. Nothing moved in the stillness. Freshly washed laundry hung limply from half a dozen clotheslines in back yards along the alley; Monday must be wash day for the women of Way-cross. Two rather large dogs, hounds of a sort, lay in the shade beside the nearest house. A crow perched in uncharacteristic silence atop one of the clothesline poles. Preston could not track down the source nor pin point the exact area where his subconscious had detected something amiss. There were an infinite number of possibilities: a tin can, polished metal, a mirror, a lens... maybe a gun barrel.

He waited; better to be sure than dead.

Two houses farther along, a door opened, a lady emerged carrying a tub of washing.

Another flicker allowed Diamond to establish the source: a cat, only its head visible, was eating from a shiny bowl beside the two sleeping hounds. Could a man be too careful? Preston slipped away quietly, believing it best to let the dogs sleep.

The alley opened onto a side street near the Fischer's residence. The shack, except for the new shingles, looked abandoned. Diamond hoped conditions would soon improve for the two men he

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had tentatively hired. He wanted to let them know of developments so far, but everything depended on his staying alive for the next few days. Neither Luke or Lonny needed any further disappointment.

Main street held the usual activity of mid-afternoon: a couple farm wagons, one parked, the other travelling toward Preston, several hipshot horses at the hitching rails, a cowboy watering his mount at the trough, two pedestrians walking cat-a-corner across the intersection, Sheriff Dexter strolling toward his office. The men Preston sought, or avoided were not visible. Diamond waited for the approaching wagon to pass then, using it as a screen, crossed the street to the Grand Hotel.

Collier's colleague acknowledged McBain's entrance to the lobby. The man lacked Frank's geniality, but he was effervescent in comparison to Abel Stafford. McBain strode to the counter and asked if he had received any messages. As the clerk turned and thumbed through the pigeon holes, Preston caught a glimpse of the opened register: Rittinger had checked out, three others had checked in. Scrawl on the registry: Peel and Dunvegan, matching the names on the bedrolls he had seen at the rail depot.

“No messages, Mr. McBain.”

Preston went up the stair, his footfalls silent. He edged up to his door and checked for the tiny

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seal. It was in place. With the skeleton key he opened the lock, pushed gently on the door while standing to one side of the door frame. A slight resistance caused the door to close; a draft caused by an unbalance in temperatures from the room to hallway.

The window was open.

Diamond palmed the Colt and paused for reflection. He had ensured the glass had been latched before leaving his room. Someone had entered via the window. Were they still in there waiting for him or had they searched his belongings (again) then exited back the same way? Or... had two persons discovered the tattle-tail seal; one entered the room, the other reattached the seal? An intruder may have opened the window to allow air movement in the stuffy chamber; he would have to be a patient chap to spend the day cooped up with no fresh air. Preston bolted down the hall, thudded loudly on the stairs, wheeled and silently stole back to his room. His plan was to allow the stowaway time to escape through the window or come out through the doorway. In either case, Preston moved fast enough to at least catch a glimpse. He kicked the unlatched door open and dove into the room.

Abandoned.

Ransacked.

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Anger surged through Diamond as he collected his possessions. His trunk had been forced open, contents strewn about. A rapid summary detected nothing stolen. The intruder must have been searching for a specific item... the only thing that could be was information; information Preston held pertaining to this investigation. The hotel furnishings received a beating: the mattress, tick and sheets were ripped from the bed, drawers from the nightstand and chest were dumped on the floor, even the pillow slips were turned inside out.

The Whitmore and Remington received careful scrutiny. The weapons were both operable. The sight adjustment on the long tube scope of the Whitmore had not been tampered with; Preston had the settings marked. Holding the optic to his eye Diamond scanned through the open window; the lenses were clear, the cross-hairs set... A rider, his horse at full gallop, appeared in the view. There was something familiar, but the distance was too far to be certain.

Diamond lay the Whitmore on the displaced mattress, then pawed through the inventory of his belongings in search of the pocket telescope. A rumpled sheet of paper he had not noticed before, possibly blown from its initial resting place by the

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breeze in the room, caught his attention. Straightening the note he read large scrawled letters: "WE HAVE SAMTHA DEXER". Preston flipped over the page... nothing.

He found the telescope and quickly focused on the fast moving horse.

It was Samantha Dexter... Behind her a second rider had appeared; using the bridle reins he whipped his mount to greater speed. The powerful optic showed clearly the fear on Samantha's face. Preston watched as she risked a glance behind then put heels to her racing steed.

The man in pursuit was gaining. They were still more than half a mile out; he may catch the girl before she reached the safety of the town.

Diamond tossed the telescope on the heap and frantically searched for his ammunition. He found the package, fumbled a load into the breech of the Whitmore and returned to the window. The low power scope on the 'Sharp-shooter' now revealed more than Preston hoped to see: Samantha's horse was faltering; the man in pursuit had a carbine in his hand. Did he intend to shoot the girl, or maybe her horse? Preston knew that, at full gallop, accuracy was non-existent.

Preston saw a white puff of smoke from the distant rifle. A moment later the muffled sound of the shot arrived... Samantha's horse kept running...



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Using the window sill for a rest, Diamond nestled the custom moulded stock against his shoulder; his cheek brushed the smooth finish as he placed the cross-hairs on the rider's chest; there was a faint "click" from the set of the hair trigger... Preston judged the distance, raised the barrel and allowed for travel on the moving target.

The rider had levered another round into his carbine and was trying to shoot single handed. He was only a few lengths behind the fleeing girl.

Preston let out his breath and squeezed the trigger.

The now headless horseman tumbled from the saddle rolling to a stop in the grass beside the wagon road.

Samantha's horse slowed, sagged and went to its knees.

Preston did not wait to see more. He raced down the stair and out into the street. A few people, startled by the blast from the Whitmore, were gawking around in wonder. Sheriff Dexter, pounding along the boardwalk, stopped when he saw McBain on the run. The sheriff instantly drew a conclusion: "What the hell," he panted, "were you shootin' at?"

"Samantha!" Preston shouted. "Moody, grab a horse! Follow me."

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Dexter bawled, "You were shootin' at Sam?" But McBain, running like an antelope, didn't break stride as he headed for the west side of town.

"Gimme that horse," Sheriff Dexter bellowed at a cowboy leaning on a hitching rail.

McBain and Dexter reached Samantha and her fallen horse at the same time. The animal was one of the pair Preston had noticed tethered in front of the bank this morning. A peculiar single white sock on the right forefoot and blaze forehead marked it. No wonder the horse had died in the chase, it had been nearly dead on its feet hours ago. The girl had not been thrown; in a shocked daze she walked around the prostrate animal. When she realized who had come to her assistance, Samantha collapsed in Preston's arms. He held her close, speaking in reassuring tones. Moody helped ease her to a seated position, facing away, and a short distance back, from the dusty road.

"What happened, Sam? Are you all right?" the girl's step-father asked anxiously.

Samantha sobbed, tears flowing down her cheeks. "I don't know... I don't know what happened... I'm so confused..."

"Well, how come you are out here? Who's dead horse is this?" Dexter focused along the trail where a second horse stood, feet tangled in its reins. Not far beyond, something that looked like a body, lay at the side of the road. "And who..."

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McBain broke in, "We best let the doctor have a look at her right away, Moody. She may need something to calm her down. Maybe she will be able to answer your questions later."

Leaving Samantha with her dad, Preston walked down the trail to the riderless horse. This animal was not of the same pair. He freed the reins from its front feet and led the mount to the place where its former rider had stopped rolling. The horse balked at the scent of blood. A broken Winchester lay nearby. There wasn't much recognizable in the absent facial features; maybe a family member would know. Preston did note the ragged, dirty cast on the fellow's right arm. Someone had scrawled on the plaster, in large clumsy letters quite similar to the writing on the paper left in Diamond's hotel room, one word: **BALLARD.**

Diamond recalled the tough who had harassed him when he worked as a bank clerk in Clarkston. The hooligan had pushed too hard and Preston gave him a broken arm for the trouble. Now, that man had come here.

Preston looked at the bloody corpse and considered his own arrival in Way-cross last week; the local welcoming committee lacked a certain courtesy.

A young man with a long nose, dog-trotted up to where Samantha and Dexter sat as McBain

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returned leading the horse with the empty saddle. The newcomer had a note-book and pencil in his hand; though the camera and tripod were absent, Preston immediately recognised him as the reporter who arrived on the noon train. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

Dexter raised his eye-brows, "Who's askin'?"

"Colon Patch," he offered his hand, "from Kansas City... I'm a newspaper reporter."

The sheriff ignored the gesture. "We heard you were coming. How the hell did you get here so fast?"

The newsman grinned amicably, "Oh, I was in the area... sort of; caught the first train to Way-cross after I heard some one had killed The Chief. Big news that, you know, he murdered a lot of people...."

McBain interrupted. "Moody, we best get Samantha to Doc Stohl."

Colon Patch hammered questions at them as Dexter and McBain helped Samantha into the saddle of the deceased man's horse. "How come that horse is dead? Where did this horse come from? I saw you come out here and only one of you rode... but there are, counting the dead one, three horses here now..." He gave a yelp of surprise, "Hey! There's a dead body over there!"

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McBain led Samantha's new mount, Dexter rode his confiscated horse alongside. They ignored the newsman when he caught up to them.

Dexter and McBain sat in the sheriff's office, the younger man giving the account of what he knew. Doc Stohl had given Samantha laudanum to settle her down and she had fallen asleep in one of his rooms. Edith Dexter sat with her daughter; Moody had ridden out to the ranch and brought his wife to town.

"Somebody trashed my hotel room, looking for I don't know what —nothing was missing—and they left that note."

Dexter studied the misspelled scratch, it was worse than his own writing. "Why would they take *my* daughter and leave a note in *your* room?"

McBain shook his head. "They left no instructions, no demands. They must have planned to contact you, or I, later. Moody, I think they were trying to draw me out. I've told you before, there are people —and I still don't know who— in this town who want me dead."

"But that has nothing to do with Samantha!" the sheriff protested.

McBain spoke softly, "Whoever is at the bottom of this, knows that Samantha and I are... good friends."

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Dexter locked eyes with McBain. “If anything happens to my daughter, McBain, I’ll hunt you until one or both of us is dead.”

McBain held the stare. “I’m sorry, Moody. If anything does happen to Samantha, I’m not so sure I’d want to be alive anyway.”

## *Chapter 20*

The newsman spread the news that a man had been shot on the outskirts of town. It didn't take long for the rumour mill to fill in the blanks and connect the dots. A distorted version went something like this: *'Samantha Dexter had been kidnapped from her sewing shop by a stranger. She somehow escaped and tried to outrun him but her horse died on its feet. The kidnapper was trying to kill Samantha, but that newcomer, McBain, shot him in the head, at a distance of over a mile...'*

Gossip missed the truth by half a country mile.

Brad McBain drove the carriage which brought the three Dexters out to their ranch later that night. Samantha had awakened from a sound

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sleep, still confused but refreshed. She wanted to go home; she wanted to tell what she knew; she wanted Bradley McBain by her side to hear her story.

Edith Dexter fussed around the kitchen fixing a late lunch while Samantha sat at the big family table with McBain and her step-father. “It doesn't make any sense,” Samantha began, “Matilda and I were in the sewing shop, we were both at our machines... I had just given the wedding dresses to Mrs. Olson—we had finished them on Friday—it was quiet in the room, Matilda said something... I think it was about tea... and... then.... Oh! I can't remember anything! All of a sudden, I was on the back of a horse... there was this strange man with a cast on his arm, riding in front of me, leading my horse—it wasn't my horse though, it was a different horse and it seemed so tired—we were headed west on the coach road... I knew where we were because we crossed the fork that leads up to the timber... It was too real to be a dream....

Mrs. Dexter poured tea for everyone; Dexter added brandy to his and McBain's cups. Edith stood beside her daughter as the girl continued. “I didn't know what to do. I couldn't see the man's face but I knew I wouldn't know him if he did turn around. My horse tripped or stumbled and the man looked back... I shut my



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eyes, I don't know why; maybe I thought it might be better if he thought I was sleeping. He got off his horse and walked back to me; he began checking the feet on my horse... I grabbed the reins and lashed him across the face and put the heels to my horse. It was a gallant horse, he ran his heart right out for me.”

Samantha put her hands over her face and sobbed. “It..it was like a nightmare, like so many nightmares I've had... I couldn't get away... my horse ran for all he had but it wasn't enough... the horrible man was catching up... I saw town but it seemed so far away and I couldn't get any closer... then I heard a bullet over my head and a gun shot behind me... my horse was going down... he died on his feet... I jumped from the saddle and landed in the grass. We weren't moving forward anymore... I got to my feet hoping to run to town... I looked back... the man suddenly flew out of the saddle and tumbled along the side of the road....

And then Brad and Dad were there.”

The room was silent.

Samantha looked up at her mother, “What is happening to me, Mother? Why can't I remember what I've done?”

Dexter said, “Maybe you hit your head in a fall or something. Matilda, she come out on the street when we led you into town. She was a mess

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—worried sick— worse off than you, I'd say. She tol' us she had left the shop to buy some tea at the store and you were gone when she come back. When you was gone so long she began a'frettin'. O' course, I couldn't ask her many questions on account o' she can't hear me.”

Samantha ran a hand through her long hair, and smiled faintly, “No, I don't think there are any bumps on my noggin... I have no aches or pains, anywhere.”

During the time while Doctor Stohl examined Samantha and Dexter had gone to fetch his wife, Preston had returned to his ravaged room. A diligent search revealed nothing more than the poorly written note announcing Samantha had been taken. He had punctiliously cleaned the deadly Whitmore and stowed the rifle along with his other belongings in the trunk. The broken latch on the chest would need replacing; Preston's temporary repair would suffice until a locksmith could fix it properly. A hotel maid had changed the bedding and tidied up the room.

The clock was now approaching midnight. Preston was stretched out on the bed in his room, ruminating. Several messages, all in code, were

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waiting for him when he had arrived back at the hotel. The new information, combined with Preston's own findings, eliminated many questions, though a few assumptions needed firming up.

Diamond conjectured that Rittinger and the two men the governor had met on the rail platform were previously known to one another; the meeting had not been mere chance. The horse Samantha had ridden to death had been in the possession of one of these men who went by the names of Dunvegan and Peel; had Ballard stolen it or was he also known to the strangers? Where were Peel and Dunvegan now; according to the register they had checked in to the Grand Hotel. Where had Ballard intended to take his hostage? Had the trio planned a rendezvous? As Frazier Wentworth, Preston had seen all three of these men, though not together, in Clarkston; was this a coincidence? Frazier had overheard two of them threaten Herman Goldman and now Herman was dead. He was certain that was not a coincidence.

Preston believed that Ballard had not seen through the Wentworth disguise prior to the shooting at the Clarkston bank. Obviously Ballard or someone else realized this false identity after the disgraced clerk fled town, because a bullet awaited Diamond's arrival in Way-cross.

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Ritinger's association with Peel and Dunvegan incriminated the Governor... but why would a man of high office become involved in a scheme to control the banking industry in this largely unsettled land?

Unsettled land; that was food for thought....

Diamond recalled Patrick O'Malley's prediction that Way-cross will one day be a city; in fact, Ritinger himself had grandstanded on a similar issue involving growth for the entire Territory. If Way-cross and her sister towns in the western territories experienced population increases, certainly the rural census would rise accordingly. Population growth necessitated real estate growth which was synonymous with higher property values. Sky-rocketing urban real estate; higher land prices in the rural areas—for the optimistic, especially an optimist privy to federal development initiatives—right now would be an opportune time for investment.

Preston digested that concept. The small town financial institutions that had recently changed hands were now ruthless in their repossession schemes. Businesses, ranches, small holdings, property of any description—in a very large radius of Way-cross—had come under ownership of these ostensibly independent banks. The man standing at the top of the midden heap, in control of twenty or thirty small town money

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houses and their associated real estate, could one day enjoy considerable political influence, maybe more so than a territorial governor. The king-pin would definitely amass more wealth than the average political figure.

And the other gnawing, bone of contention: *Who supplied the initial investment capital to buy out the financial institutions?*

Sated with questions, Preston hungered for answers. Soundless as a bat he glided along the lamp lit hall and up the stair to the rooms registered in the names of the mystery men. Using a Double Eagle for a mirror, he checked for light reflection under the doors. Dunvegan and Peel were out, asleep or waiting silently in the dark.

Knowing killers were plotting his death honed Diamond's senses: stay alert; stay alive. The situation was not new for the intrepid loner and Preston had learned that the hunter has an advantage over the prey in that he can choose time, place and means. "The hunter becomes the hunted," is simply too trite; clichés generally are: Diamond didn't just turn the tables, he flipped them over and lit them on fire; he didn't put the shoe on the other foot, he put foot and shoe into someone's

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groin; the hunter didn't become the hunted, he was eliminated; survival of the fastest; the best offence is a dead opponent. Preston Diamond had no rules, no laws; he did not play, he *worked* at staying alive.

The hunter padded down the stair and exited through the rear doorway. Rain water and puddles on the back streets had evaporated with the heat of the past two days. Now dried clods thrown up by delivery vehicles crunched underfoot. Preston proceeded slowly. The town had an unnatural quiet hanging over it, like everyone was holding their breath. Another day, another killing; no wonder the townsfolk had closed their shutters and blown out the lamps. Even the saloon offered no boisterous laughter or tinny piano music. Houses and businesses were dark; only the lantern above the hotel door illuminated the near area. A shy sliver of moon, peeking through thin cloud, would soon brighten the townscape.

At the rear of Samantha's store, Diamond paused again. No sound or light came from within. Mrs. Frye would be in bed at this late hour. Why did this establishment persist in drawing his attention? Could a sewing shop be more than it seemed? Did a deaf widow and a beautiful young woman fit into the puzzle? Samantha was indeed a part of the story now, but he doubted she had volunteered. Maybe, Preston considered, because he had been shot at from the roof of this building,

the shop heralded significance in the yarn. Or, most likely, the attraction was the beautiful proprietress; a distraction to his investigation. He would have to wait for the spool to unwind further.

A coal oil lantern burned in the double doorway of the livery stable. Preston slipped inside and was surprised to find Ol' Ross up and moving about. Not for the first time he wondered what season the old timer chose to have a bath; perhaps it wasn't an annual event.

"McBain," the hostler grunted. "What could have brung ya down here this hour?"

"I need my horse."

"Ya don't look to me like yer ready to climb into a saddle... or did ya just decide in the last minute or so?"

McBain shrugged. "No, I don't really want my horse... I was just testing you. "

Tobacco juice splattered the side of the feed pail. "So, I heerd ya shot some dumb bastard that was achasin' Dexter's daughter..."

McBain interrupted. "Samantha was riding one of the horses you saw the two men mounted on this morning, the fellows that asked you directions to the rail depot..."

"Yeh, I recollect that. She must have been on that blazed face bay with one white sock, right front foot."

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McBain blurted, "Do you study every horse you see?"

"Habit, habit I had since I 'as a tad. Not as good as I once was, but I can pick out markin's like that 'un had. The other one, a bay mare," Ross jerked a thumb over his shoulder, "is back here."

"Mind if I look her over?" McBain asked.

"Not much to see, the poor ol' girl's be'n rid pretty hard and not looked after. But ya can take a look if it suits yer fancy."

The mare, in a stall next to Preston's gelding, still looked worn out but she had been eating the hay Ol' Ross had tossed in the manger. An empty feed bucket indicated that the animal had had some grain too. There wasn't anything peculiar about the beast. It had two brands but that held no significance as many horses change owners.

Over the back of the mare, McBain asked the livery man, "Were both horses brought to you this afternoon? I'm wondering how that stranger who abducted Miss Dexter came in possession of the horse that died on the edge of town."

"Weeelll, that's a funny thing about that." The hostler rubbed his stubble, "Them two fellers did come back from the depot, if they found their way to the tracks that is, and they left both their hosses here. Not much time later, one of them fellas and another stranger showed up..."



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McBain broke in, "Did the new stranger have a cast on his right arm."

"Yep, I recollect he did have a broke limb, too... Anyhows, they asked for this first fella's hoss and I tol' 'em the critter wasn't fit to ride to the edge of town... They said he wouldn't have to go much farther than that and they didn't need a race horse."

Ol' Ross shuffled away. Preston considered: Ballard may have put Samantha on a tired horse as a precaution against what did actually take place; had they been any farther from town, he would have easily overtaken her. But why didn't he, or they, rent a buggy or buckboard? How did Ballard lead her out of the town in broad daylight? Samantha must have appeared willing to follow or someone would have seen them and raised an alarm. Had she been drugged? What kind of drug would allow a person to snap out of a stupor instantaneously? And how was it administered in the first place?

More questions: fewer answers.

Preston said good night to Ol' Ross and left the big livery barn through the rear entrance.

The moon had lost its reticence and now shone quarter-heartedly in the absence of cloud cover. Diamond moved stealthily among the scattered beams and shadows of the alley on the south side and parallel to Main Street. O'Malley's brick bank building stood solid and sedate; nothing

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appeared amiss. Preston made his way to the part of town where the O'Malley's resided. Not necessarily the affluent section —Way-cross didn't boast a Knob Hill— all remained dark and quiet at the large two story home. All was dark and quiet everywhere in Way-cross; no owl hooted, no dog barked, the garbage can cats were still.

The calm before a storm?

## *Chapter 21*

Barbara Kirwin nearly smiled when serving McBain his breakfast next morning; she hesitated in refusing the gratuity he offered. He could have left a tip on the table but that would have detracted from the game. Summed up, Miss Kirwin had refused a considerable amount of easy coin over the course of the past week or so; Preston wondered if that notion had occurred to her.

Before stepping outside May Anne's eatery, McBain surveyed the avenue from the cafe window. Most everything appeared normal except that Colon Patch, the reporter, had set up his camera and tripod in the street. The contraption was aimed at the door of May Anne's establishment. The man was bent over, his head hidden under a small curtain affair designed to prevent light entering the picture box. Behind Patch, Sheriff Moody Dexter left his office and

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angled across the street. When Moody reached the photographer he tapped the man on the shoulder; Patch emerged from under the curtain; Preston stepped out onto the street.

Colon Patch protested, "But it won't spook the horses, Sheriff. It's just a little 'poof' and a small cloud of smoke. It..."

"There he is! Mr. McBain! Mr. McBain, would you like to pose for a picture? I'm going to have it printed along with a post mortem photograph of The Chief and the story of your hand-to-hand duel to the death, for the Kansas City Star; that's our new newspaper and we have hundreds, maybe thousands of readers and the story will be published in other papers too, down east, even to New York City, likely, so you won't want to pass up the opportunity I am giving you to become world famous... Mr. McBain, hold on a minute..."

McBain paid no attention to the photographer and soon disappeared into the barber shop two doors farther along.

Dexter mused, "I guess he ain't interested in becoming worldly famous. Now you git that gadget off'n my streets or I'll lock you up in the calaboose for being a public nuisance."

Patch reluctantly folded his tripod and lugged the equipment to the boardwalk. He waited until Moody Dexter had continued on to May Anne's eatery, then proceeded in the wake of

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McBain. The reporter again set up his picture-taking apparatus near the barber's establishment. Apparently he hoped for a photograph of "The Way-cross Gunman" sporting a fresh shave and haircut. Though the clock lacked a quarter of an hour from ten in the morning, the sun, focused on this side of the street, had already preheated the oven to bread-baking temperature. Colon Patch alternated between hiding under his darkening curtain and emerging with squinting eyes to swipe perspiration from his brow.

Inside the shop, McBain took a seat in the swivel barber's chair. Tony, the Way-cross barber, was a dapper little man who flitted about like a chickadee on a suet log. Maintaining steady platitudinous chatter, he tactfully avoided allusion to the notoriety of his customer or the recent run of crime and killings in Way-cross. In the days since McBain's arrival, the shop had rung with news reports and rumour. Barbers enjoy a helping of gossip too.

Facing the chair, a large, ornately framed mirror reflected a view of the street outside. Though Colon Patch was hidden, Preston read in the reactions of passers-by that something was amiss near the right hand side of the entrance. He suspected it would be the persistent newspaper man. Subtle movement across the street behind the slab board wall of Leon's Mercantile lumber yard

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indicated that the camera fellow may not be the only chap basking in the sun awaiting an opportunity to view Preston's new hair style. The man in the tonsorial chair seldom showed up late for appointments but he loathed surprise parties.

As Tony scraped away the stubble, Preston considered the predicament he would soon be in: *If* there was a sniper secluded across the street, it would probably be one of the two strangers, Peel or Dunvegan, who met with Rittinger yesterday. Were they together? If not, where was the other one? Diamond wondered if they would be efficient enough to place the second man at the back of the building. He doubted not at all that they were quite capable men of the gun. Perhaps, too, they had brought in new recruits since Ballard would no longer be available...

Preliminaries and preambular rhetoric had closed; it was time for the main event. Preston had pushed the conspirators beyond the edge of caution; they were desperate to be rid of him. The colluders had no way of knowing what information he retained; nothing had been revealed to them on the occasions that Preston's luggage and room were searched; but what information had he passed on to his confederates? And who/where were they? The

cabal could only presume the worst and that fear began to fray already over-strained nerves. Something had to break. This time they must not fail.

“Is there a rear exit to your shop?” Preston asked as the straight razor slipped smoothly through the growth on his throat.

Tony chirped, “Normally I come and go through the front entrance but there is a rear door opening into the alley that I use to take out my trash. As a rule customers aren't allowed access through there...”

McBain smiled disarmingly and confided in a conspiratorial tone, “Only, there is a news reporter waiting for me to step out on the street. I'd like to avoid him for the time being. If you could let me out through the back, I'd be grateful.”

The voice was neither pleading nor demanding but Tony-The-Barber recognized futility in argument. “Of course, Mr...er... Mr. McBain, isn't it?”

Diamond paid the man four-bits for his service and followed him through to the back door. A small curtained window faced the alley and Preston studied the buildings opposite. There were many places for a man with a rifle to crouch down in waiting. No obstacles were in a direct line of the door; a grain wagon and pair of draft horses stood

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parked a few yards down. A sweaty man in filthy shirt and trousers pitched garbage into the wagon box. Preston stepped across the alley and drew up against the wall of the neighbouring shop.

His senses detected nothing out of the ordinary. Preston glided down the back alley and emerged on the side street. He scanned the area, crossed the avenue and went another block before turning south across the main thoroughfare. Arriving in the back alley on the far side of Main Street, Preston sprinted west until he came to the boarded perimeter of Leon's lumber yard. Stacks of wood of various dimensions obscured his view as he peered between the vertical slabs of fence. Using a garbage barrel for a leg up he scaled the eight foot wall to alight inside on a pile of rough-cut two-by-fours.

Empty... almost.

He surprised a perspiring Mercantile employee who was shifting boards next to the heap Preston had landed on.

Diamond holstered his Colt, placed a finger to his lips, winked and strode over to the back door of the Mercantile. The astonished worker let one end of the board sag to the ground and watched wordlessly as Preston went inside.

Browsing near the entrance of the store, Preston followed activity on Main Street; there wasn't much. Scorching heat had driven all but the



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hadiest to shade. Horses, tied or hitched, swatted and stamped at the vicious horseflies that worshipped the heat. The camera man, if it had been him attracting attention in front of the barber shop, had folded his equipment and taken shelter too. Peel and Dunvegan were nowhere to be seen.

A voice hailed McBain and he turned to see Leon Nybo, proprietor of the Mercantile. "Leo" had been very gracious in assisting Preston in finding materials and loaning him the use of tools (for a small rental fee) for the repair of the sewing shop window. Preston noted again that the Way-cross merchants he encountered were not inclined to pass judgement upon a man, at least not in his presence. Following the ubiquitous weather discussion, Diamond asked about lumber and made inquiries as to the cost of building a house. Nybo failed to hide his astonishment but maintained a business air, asking no prying questions. The nail seller invited McBain into his office and together they drew up a preliminary house plan. Preston, if he stayed alive, would eventually need the lumber, but at the moment he wanted to use up time while his enemies stewed over his whereabouts.

Leo saw McBain to the door, promising to prepare a cost summary and have it ready by the end of the week. Suffering heat struck Preston's face and seared his lungs as he stepped out of the store. The mid day sun was a Devil's blast furnace

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as the noon stage wheeled down the street in a cloud of suffocating dust, the lathered horses reeling in their traces. Preston turned back into the store catching Nybo as he strode to his office. The proprietor raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“I’d like to use your back door, if you don’t mind,” McBain explained.

“Certainly, certainly, Mr. McBain. Our customers use it all the time...”

Preston hurried to the back, braced himself for the heat and stepped out among the piles of lumber. This time he exited the yard through an open double gate.

Passengers were stepping off the stage when Diamond reached a vantage point near the depot. A strong hunch bore evidence when he discovered Dunvegan and Peel among the little crowd near the coach. One of them held a rifle in the crook of his arm. Preston did not recognize the man they had come to meet but he recognized the type: a gun for hire. Long limbed, long nosed, the man had a piercing gaze Preston could discern from a distance. He did not swagger but had a reassurance about him that emanated across the stage ground. The ivory grip of a revolver protruded from the holster at his hip. There was no obvious show of amicability between the newcomer and those who waited for him. They

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were all here on business, serious business of a deadly kind, and the sooner the job was completed, the sooner they could be shut of each other's company.

The sweltering heat inside the stage had taken its toll on the four passengers; everyone was down to the bare essentials decency would allow. The horses, being lead away, were dripping in sweat; Preston heard George Kirwin admonishing the driver for not being more considerate of the animals under these extreme conditions. "And don't give them a drop of water 'til they're cooled out good," Kirwin shouted to the harness man. Peel or Dunvegan, Preston didn't know them as individuals, latched on to the gun man's war bag and began toting it in the opposite direction of the hotel. The other two men followed and, at a distance, Diamond tagged along too.

The threesome were headed to the rail depot if Diamond's next guess was accurate. But he did not believe the stage passenger was merely transferring to the train. Most likely these three would be meeting with a new arrival or arrivals on the in-bound Union Pacific.

Heat waves shimmered on the black steel of the locomotive parked near the platform. The dirty faced fireman guzzled water from a dipper as he oversaw proceedings at the water tower. Sweat had

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poured down his coal dusted features leaving black rivulets along his cheeks and chin. Preston, concealed behind a carriage, did not envy the coal stoker his employment on this day.

The man holding the rifle received curious and disdainful stares from the group near the station but he was oblivious. Diamond watched him shift the gun and almost drop it when his hand touched burning steel. Preston tentatively put a finger to the iron rim of the buggy; it was too hot to hang on to.

Passengers on the in-bound numbered seven: A youngish cattleman with his wife and two small children, a middle-aged chap of unidentifiable purpose, sporting a narrow moustache and long nose. The last two seemed to know each other; they wore pistols on their hips.

A dust devil swirled across an open area collecting grit, leaves and debris, whisked them high into the air, danced around tethered horses, tugged at manes and tails, then swept joyously over the platform; ladies clutched at dresses, men grabbed for their hats; silently laughing, it spiralled away, skipping along the rails, leaving folks rubbing sand blasted faces and digging dust from their eyes.

Shimmering heat rushed in to fill the void left by the tiny twister. Instantly, horses, people and leaves returned to their former wilted state.

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Preston snatched a bothersome horsefly from the air. Things were heating up in Way-cross, and not entirely from the merciless sun. The two armed passengers joined the trio waiting on the platform. A band of five mercenaries... hired for what? Preston was too modest to believe anyone would contract that many people just for his hide. Something bigger lay in store.

A startled Sheriff Dexter shifted his bulk but did not rise from his seat behind the big oak desk when McBain surprised him by arriving unannounced through the rear entrance of the sheriff's office.

“Damn it, McBlaine, can't you do things the way normal people do; like, use the front entry?”

“*McBain.* Sorry, Sheriff, I was out for a stroll and when I saw your door, thought I might stop in for a visit. It was too hot to come around to the front.”

“It's too damned hot for walking in the back way, too,” Dexter growled. Perspiration trickled down his cheeks and beads of sweat oozed from his forehead like a squeezed soggy sponge. “I be'n roastin' in this oven, wishtin' I could go home and throw myself in the creek, but it's so goddamn hot outside I don't want to ride the horse.”

“How is Samantha today, Moody?” McBain asked.

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“Weeeelll... contrary as all git-out. Her mother and I both tol' her to stay home and rest up, but she didn't want to leave Widow Frye alone with so much work agoin' on... she's at her shop; I be'n keepin' an eye on the place but it's got a back door too... I went over twice but she shoed me out the second time...”

“Moody, the town is headed for trouble. Big trouble. And quite soon....”

Dexter studied McBain's face. “There has been nothin' but trouble for...for... how long you be'n here? Anyway, it started when you rode in.”

“Actually, Sheriff, it started before I arrived; remember the hold-up at the rail depot? You already had Kenny Lester in your jail when I came to Way-cross.”

Dexter grunted. “Yeah, you may have reminded me of that before. Well, it ain't slowed down none in your presence.”

“It will escalate now. I don't want you or Samantha to be caught in the middle.”

“What makes you so certain we're in for a heap of grief, all of a sudden?”

Preston informed the sheriff of the five armed strangers patrolling the streets of his town. “They are after me, that is a fact, but there is something more going on. I suspect Patrick

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O'Malley and his family may be targeted. These people intend to take-over the Way-cross bank and they will be merciless in the way they choose to do it.”

“Take over the bank!” Dexter expostulated. “How the hell can anyone take over the bank?”

“It has been done all over this territory in the past two or three years. To my knowledge, Way-cross will be number thirty-one. Most small town bankers sold out for an offer too grand to refuse—I cannot identify the source of the buyers' capital—others were persuaded or strong-armed into giving up their holdings; several bankers who stoutly refused to sell under any circumstance, were murdered; one was found dead in his home, ostensibly death from natural causes; another took a spill from his horse or fell off a cliff; two were assassinated during staged bank robberies.”

Preston could read denial in the sheriff's eyes.

Dexter glared at the younger man. “Just where the hell do you dig up all this hogwash?”

Diamond realized, since his arrival in Way-cross, he had stretched or broken so many of his stringent personal rules of conduct that they now existed as fragile guidelines. Why had he taken an interest in the welfare of Lonny Fischer and his

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father? Why was he buying property? Why did he caution Patrick O'Malley? Why did he —and this may be the wicked virus that weakened his resolve — why did he fall in love?

He said, “Moody, I have a job, I make certain inquiries into certain situations for an elite group of quite influential people. If I can solve a situation, I do so. Sometimes I call in men of high authority and they clean up the hornets after I have disturbed the nest....

“For the past six months, or so, I'm losing track, I have been investigating a situation in a radius of one hundred to a hundred and fifty miles of Way-cross. I believe your town is the hub, the base of the operation. Maybe for that reason, O'Malley's institution has not been harassed... until now. The syndicate does not know how much I know, but they fear I know too much. They will attempt to eliminate me and, at the same time take control of O'Malley's business. This they will do very soon.

During McBain's disclosure a host of expressions ranging from disbelief through incredulity, at last settling upon resignation, shadowed Dexter's craggy features. He slumped further into his chair. “What do you want me to do now?” he asked tiredly.



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“Convince O'Malley to strap on a gun; maybe he already has. Don't mention anything I have told you, just say there are five heavily armed strangers in town. Unless I grossly misjudge the man, he will figure out the implications.”



## *Chapter 22*

A searing sun sizzled in the two o'clock position when Diamond left via the back door of the sheriff's office. Another whirlwind whipped along the alley gathering strength as it raced madly out into the street at the end of the block.

Preston paused at the rear of O'Malley's bank. Would the gunmen attempt an assassination during the day or would they wait until the money man had gone home? Only the heat disturbed the quietude. Diamond moved on. He considered where the hunters might be if they were seeking him: The most obvious places for them to find the investigator would be either in his room, the lobby, or maybe the lounge of the Grand Hotel; somewhere out of the heat. There could be people covering those areas, the remainder ought to be scattered about the town. No one would be on a roof-top today; a sniper couldn't hold a gun without wearing baker's mitts. A vantage point in the shade

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would be found in the loft of the livery stable. A man with a rifle could cover a sizeable section of Way-cross from there. Would he have an accomplice hidden on the main level?

Skulking along the alley, Preston came to the holding corral that adjoined the hip-roof on two sides. He slipped between the rails and edged up to the east wall. Several horses watched him through droopy eyelids. The heat was so intense the animals were disinclined to swat the flies buzzing around and biting at them. Preston knew the big front doors would be pulled aside; he wondered if the back door had been left open in the hope of a breeze filtering through. His feet made no sound as Diamond held tight to the boards and moved toward the far end. Another corral fence with a long wooden gate ran at a right angle away from this part of the building. Preston lay down on the dry earth and peered around a corner post. The rear door was ajar and the toe of a boot projected from the opening. Cigarette smoke drifted lazily on the air...

Ol' Ross didn't smoke. He chewed.

And, while awake, he seldom shut-up; if someone was in the stable with him, Ross ought to be talking... What had become of the livery man?

The ground was uncomfortably warm and smelled of horse manure but Preston felt thankful to be on the shaded side. He studied the boot toe,

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wondering how he might trace it to the owner. A cigarette butt travelled a short arc out into the second corral and lay smouldering in the dust. Now would be a poor time for a dust devil to swoop down and pick up the ember.

The toe disappeared inside the building.

Diamond wriggled under the bottom rail and came to his feet, flattening himself like paint against the wall. He shifted to the door frame and waited in silence. A series of creaking noises reached Preston's ears; someone was going up or coming down the stair to the loft. He heard low voices... there were at least two of the gunmen in the barn... something about a cigarette... the man in the loft wanted to come down for a smoke. Preston credited him with good judgement; at least he wasn't about to burn the stable, today a fire would wipe out the town.

As Diamond's acute hearing sifted through the shuffling in the loft he pictured the location of the stair. It was at the rear of the barn on the opposite side of where he now stood. Drawing the Colt he stepped inside and shifted toward the corner. No one opposed his entrance; Ol' Ross was not in sight; the main level appeared empty except for several listless horses. Preston ducked behind the partition of a vacant stall. Soon dust and a few straws preceded a pair of boots as the sniper descended the stair. As his face appeared, Preston

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recognized him as the man who had been holding the rifle over at the stage and rail depots, either Peel or Dunvegan. The fellow was bathed in sweat, the loft must be hotter than a Finn's sauna. He wore a revolver at his hip but probably had passed the rifle to his relief man. At the bottom of the steps he fumbled in a breast pocket for makings then strode to the rear doorway to roll a cigarette.

Out on the street at the front of the big livery barn a dust devil, larger than its predecessors, bumped against the face of the building. It twisted away from the wall then blew in again. On the third pass, wind in the back eddy found the open door, swept across the littered floor and funnelled through the rear exit. Peel or Dunvegan clutched at his hat with his left hand, cursing as loose tobacco and cigarette paper were ripped from his right. The wind passed and died as quickly as it came. Dust and straw clung to the gunman's damp face and clothing. He ground his knuckles against squinched lids trying to remove grit from stinging eyes. Blinking tears away, his vision gradually cleared.

A lithe, smooth skinned man wearing dark clothing and a holstered pistol stood in front of him.

Peel, for that is the name Russell Frost wrote in his records at the funeral parlour, went for his gun. The partial draw was a blur but Diamond

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moved so much faster: Leading with his right foot he stepped forward, right fist rising in a smooth and powerful upper-cut, timing perfectly velocity and momentum for maximum force on the impact which connected with the gunman's nose, crushing cartilage, flattening flesh, driving splintered bone upward, inside the skull. Into the brain. Peel crumpled without a sound; his revolver, released from lax fingers, slid back into its holster.

Diamond, as noiselessly as possible, dragged the inert form into the empty stall. He found Ol' Ross bound, gagged and unconscious in the harness room which also served as living quarters for the hostler. Preston checked his breathing and noted the flow of blood from an ugly gash on the head had stopped. Better that Ol' Ross remain asleep for now, Preston surmised, as he closed the door and stole back to the foot of the loft stairs.

Keeping slightly back from the doorway, Preston gazed out on the broiling landscape. Leaves in the cottonwoods were beginning to rustle; was there a darkening of the sky on the western horizon? Another dust devil, spawned on the open plain, traced a capricious phantom path toward the settlement. The ring of the blacksmith's hammer striking the anvil echoed on the stillness; how could the man be stoking his forge on a day like this? The smithy must be impervious to heat.

Preston mulled through a host of questions: How long would it be until the rifleman in the haymow decided to check on his companion? Was the man up there the companion of the dead man below —Peel or Dunvegan— or one of the recent arrivals? Preston thought of the tall, flint-eyed gunman who had come on the noon stage. He probably worked alone and wouldn't be in the loft waiting for a shot from ambush; he would try to draw his quarry out and shoot him down in plain view. Who would be the target in his assignment: the investigator or the O'Malleys? Another thought: Obviously Peel and Dunvegan had had McBain pointed out to them —Preston hadn't been entirely in seclusion— but he wondered how the three new imports were to recognize the man they had come here to kill. What will happen if a Way-cross citizen comes to the livery and finds Ol' Ross tied up in his own boudoir while the gunman is waiting in the loft? Preston doubted these people were mercenaries of mercy, they would not favour the innocent. So many possibilities: Diamond decided to consult with the man above.

The Stetson of the deceased rode high on Diamond's head as he wore it while ascending the stair. The fragrance of new hay teased his nostrils as his nose came level with the floor of the loft. A small stack of the forage stood in the centre, blocking view to the far end of the barn. The near



door had been flung back, daylight at the opposite wall suggested the front was opened as well. No breeze filtered through, the heat was suffocating. No one stood guard at the rear, though several pigeons studied him curiously, warbling their throaty gabble. The lookout must be stationed over the front entrance to the barn. Cautiously, Diamond edged round the stack, Colt drawn.

The fellow stood in the shadow, obscured from view of anyone on the street. His attention was riveted on something or someone below and the Winchester hung loosely in his right hand. Preston hoped he could take the man prisoner without alarming his cohorts or riddling the barn roof with bullet holes; perhaps, later, in a federal prison, the fellow would supply evidence. Diamond said, in a conversational tone, "Drop the rifle and raise your hands very slowly."

It wasn't Peel or Dunvegan, this fellow had arrived on the train. He looked up in surprise, stared at the intruder, shrugged, then dropped the Winchester. Only, as the repeater thudded on the hay strewn floor, the sentry leaped to one side, hand diving for the revolver at his hip.

*The man was fast.*

He wore a scalp-skirted, swivel holster that enabled him to fire the gun without wasting the time required to draw. However, a problem with the swivel holster is the sacrifice of accuracy for

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speed. Flame, smoke and (though Preston couldn't see it) lead erupted from the barrel. The hot slug sizzled by, slightly left of target, perforating the steep-slanted roof, tearing a long gash in several of Ol' Ross's cedar shingles as it left the building. A dash of sunlight filled the hole.

Diamond returned fire.

Twice.

The heavy .45 bullets caught the gunman high in the chest. The impact twisted his body first to the left then back to the right, the combined effect hammered the man back on his heels and propelled him, tail first, through the loft door. A dull thud announced his arrival at ground level. Fortunately, neither of Preston's shots ventilated the barn.

Reloading the Colt as he hurried to the stair, Preston took the first few steps then jumped to the lower floor. After pausing briefly to scan the foreground, retrieve his own hat and discard that of the dead man, he sprang away through the open rear door. He angled east, almost to the railway tracks, before crossing the wide open avenue. Camouflaged against a cottonwood trunk, Preston again paused to consider the situation.

The heat had not yet diminished. Overhead, the sky, a pale blue lifeless haze, hovered as though in fear. The air was oppressive. An enervating, soul-stripping pressure, like being in school,

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

weighed down on Preston. Far to the west, where he had previously noted a thin cloud or disturbance, a great dark bank of thunderheads had risen. Directly above, the leaves of the cottonwood trembled, though no trace of breeze touched the earth. Two little whirlwinds, like laughing children, raced along playing tag across the stage landing.

Shouts, originating in the direction of the livery stable, reverberated on the stillness. The shots and corpse had drawn a crowd. Soon someone would find Ol' Ross and the second dead gunman. Without a doubt, the people of Way-cross would attribute the killings to Bradley McBain. Now Preston had to avoid the townsfolk as well. He hoped the livery man would regain consciousness and be able to identify his attackers. Ol' Ross would not be shy about swinging sentiment in McBain's favour.

Preston again looked to the west. Ominous clouds were rapidly approaching, he could see them black and boiling like angry waves on an inverted sea. Lightning split the seams of darkness illuminating a glimpse of seething hell. As dull thunder boomed and rolled in the distance, a demon funnel-shape emerged from the tumult. It dropped

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toward the torrid earth like thick molasses poured from a giant's bucket. The molasses touched down, steamed, thinned in the intense heat, then splashed skyward to be devoured by the ravenous tempest.

Shots erupted.

Instantly Preston determined the location; the shots came from O'Malley's bank. Long strides carried Diamond in leaps as he pounded over the ruts and dust of the alley. Another shot ripped through the air followed by the roaring blast of a heavy rifle or shotgun. A hot drop of rain struck Preston's face as he removed his hat and chanced a cautious peek around the side of a corner building. Nothing moved on Main Street. Out on the plain, but nearer now, another towering, dirty-brown dust devil spiralled down from the black mass of thunderheads. It wavered and danced, skipping lightly to earth then rebounded up again; Way-cross lay directly in its path. Diamond sprinted the distance to the door of the bank building. All was quiet. Only the faint roar of the approaching storm disturbed the stillness. Another rain drop struck his cheek.

Preston pushed and the door swung inward. Voices, murmurs, sobs came from inside the building. Acrid smoke from burned gunpowder

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

filled the air. There was another familiar scent: the foul smell of blood and death. Diamond hailed the room and someone, a not unfamiliar voice, answered. Preston walked in, Colt drawn.

A blue haze hung near the ceiling, behind the counter a wide-eyed youth supported a sobbing young lady: the bank clerks. On a chair in the foyer, a dazed Patrick O'Malley sat slumped forward holding a bloody cloth to his upper arm. Half-way across the room in another chair, Sheriff Dexter sat with a fully cocked double-barrelled shotgun in his right hand. The close-range cannon was pointing half-heartedly toward Preston. On the floor between the two seated gentlemen a pool of blood grew around the buck-shot riddled body of a stranger. The door leading into the manager's office stood ajar, a pair of legs protruded from inside. A broad smear of blood trailed down the oak door partially obliterating the lettering.

Dexter failed to disguise the excitement in his voice. "Damn good thing you warned me about there being a hold-up at the bank, McBlaine."

"*McBain*. Good thing you listened," McBain responded.

"I came here to tell Pat about the strangers in town... He already had his Colt strapped on and

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David, here,” Moody jerked a thumb toward the young clerk, “was packing a pistol too. They had this ol' double-barrel handy, so I took hold of it and sat down to watch the show...”

While Dexter related the story, Diamond inspected the bodies. He toed the dead man on the floor: he was the second of the two train arrivals. The body half-way in to, or out of, O'Malley's office, had blood seeping from a hole in the chest where his heart used to be, dead eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling: Peel or Dunvegan. That left the lone, tall gunman who arrived via stage coach.

“...We was sittin' for awhile an' nothin' happened, but it was cool in here an' I ain't in no hurry on hot days.” Dexter eased off the hammers, broke the breech and laid the shotgun on the counter near the teller cage. “The bank folks, they went back to workin'. All to a sudden these two jaspers come in here alookin' for trouble and no mistake. That 'un over there,” the sheriff nodded at the farthest corpse, “he pulled out his gun, yanked open the office door and walked right into Patty's .45 slug... Killed him on the spot.”

McBain interrupted, “There was a delay between shots...”

Dexter reflected a moment. “Yeah, weeelll, this jasper,” Dexter stretched a booted toe in the direction of the near corpse, “he couldn't decide what to do, he was waving his shooter around

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

between young David and I when Patty come out of his office. For some reason this gent turned an' poked a shot at Patty. Hit him in the arm there as you can see. David and I both fired at once; he died pretty quick."

The senior O'Malley groaned. "God! I killed a man! I... I'm a bank manager, not a gunman... What is this town coming to?"

Sheriff Dexter turned to David O'Malley, "Best fetch your Pa over to Doc Stohl. He'll need some bandagin' up."

Moody shifted back to McBain. "An' where do you suppose the other three..."

Mayor Kirwin charged in through the entrance. He stopped short, eyes darting from one corpse to the other, his mouth working but no words coming out. At last, focusing on the sheriff, he stuttered, "We...we... just found two dead men down at the livery!"

Dexter gawked at Kirwin. "We heard shootin' along that way but..." then shifted back to McBain, "an' where do you suppose the other *one* can be?"





## *Chapter 23*

The perspiring little mob who had rushed to the livery soon flooded into the foyer of the Way-cross bank. Samantha Dexter dashed across the street from her sewing shop. David O'Malley helped his father out of the chair, intending to walk him to the clinic, but before they reached the door someone said Doc Stohl was on his way. The doctor first had to tend to Ol' Ross who had been pistol whipped.

There were a dozen or more people gathered when the storm that preceded the tornado struck; Doc Stohl, the last to arrive, was soaked through to his thin hide.

Rain descended in a miles-wide travelling waterfall. The dull, distant roar of the wind grew to a deafening bellow as colossal thunderheads spanning horizon to horizon obfuscated the sun, plunging the town into a rude and eerie twilight. Brilliant streaks and sheets of lightning ripped through the darkness, momentarily blinding with its

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wicked intensity. Hell howled at the windows. Brimstone filled the air. Thor, mythical God Of Thunder, awakened and, bellowing with mirth, strutted across the tormented sky; at every swing of Mjölner, his giant hammer, shards of lightning flew and thunder rocked the earth. The audience inside the bank stood riveted in fearful fascination. Only the doctor kept to his work.

Rain stopped. Wind lulled. False darkness presided.

People began to mull about chattering excitedly. David O'Malley lit two lamps.

"I must get back to my shop; Matilda is alone," Samantha said.

McBain, who had been standing beside Samantha and her father, grasped her hand in gentle restraint. "This building is the safest in Way-cross... please, don't leave right now."

Samantha, Moody and those who overheard the plea looked at McBain in puzzlement.

An explanation arrived upon the wind.

On the outskirts of Way-cross, the tornado touched down with a roar then swept into the town with a prolonged scream. The blacksmith's shop, with its firebox of white hot coals, offered nothing to divert the rush. The roof lifted off and contents within were drawn out in the vacuum. The glowing embers ignited in the air and where they found dry tinder, spawned a thousand tiny fires. The

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powerful smithy clung to his anvil moored in a concrete base. He lost his trousers and suffered a hundred tiny burns, but saved most of his skin. The storm ripped diagonally through the settlement leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. From the windows of the bank the living souls gaped in horror while the two dead men, oblivious and immune to the ravages of nature, oozed blood upon the floor. Clods of mud, shingles, doors and furniture spiralled skyward. George Kirwin recognized the misshapen form of his porch swing. A green painted two-hole outhouse sailed high in the sky, possibly on its way to Kansas. A horseless carriage rocketed along the street. Its shafts caught a rut, the front wheels dug in and the buggy cartwheeled out of sight. Two terrified mounts tied at a hitching rail, reared and struggled against their tether; the beam broke and the horses raced away, empty stirrups flapping. The marauding twister broke through the slab wall of Leo Nybo's lumber yard. Fresh milled wood filled the air like tossed handfuls of toothpicks; a large plank struck the entrance to the bank. The heavy door held but the board passed through coming to a juddering stop two feet inside the building. Wooden debris of varying dimensions buffeted the building, shattering windows, driving the watchers back from the jagged missiles of glass. Papers, curtains,

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loose articles of clothing, even several hats were sucked out into the storm. The whirling wall of debris became a dizzying blur. The tornado swept on, its scream diminishing in the distance.

Seconds had elapsed, but it seemed an eternity; for some, a lifetime.

In the silence that followed, a collective sigh of relief escaped the survivors. Immobile, they gazed in shocked horror upon the broken and flattened buildings that had been their town. From the broken windows the group could see at least three columns of smoke drifting skyward; there may be more beyond their vision. A dust begrimed youth holding a pup in one arm emerged from under the boardwalk across the debris strewn street. Preston recognized Lonny Fischer. People appeared at the doors of homes and businesses that had withstood the blast. Other folks crawled up from basements and cellars to gape in wonder at the ruination.

A tentative voice broke the tension.

“Would this be a good moment to propose?”

As one, the group turned toward the question. David O'Malley had his arms around his pretty colleague. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips...

Life goes on.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Satisfied the storm had passed, the people who had taken refuge in the bank building scattered to check on their homes and loved ones. Samantha dashed across the littered street to see Matilda. Dexter caught a horse and rode directly to the ranch but returned in short order when he found his wife had come to no harm. He joined Samantha, McBain and others in searching the wreckage, responding to cries for help and groans of pain. A miracle and the common sense to hide in cellar holes had preserved the lives of most of the citizens. There were more able-bodied than injured. Temporary housing, food and blankets were set up at the school for the women and children. Ol' Ross's loft provided a leaking roof over the heads of the male contingent seeking refuge.

A rainbow and bright sunshine would have helped the rescue team, but the sky remained dark and the temperature plunged. Rain returned, a steady, soaking drizzle. Fires were extinguished before the flames went completely out of control but several buildings that had tolerated the gale were burned to the ground. Except for the windows and door, the bank had withstood the twister; it fared better than most buildings. The Grand Hotel and the livery barn, the largest edifices in Way-cross, did not collapse though they took severe punishment: windows were smashed on

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three sides of the hotel, roofing stripped, front entrance and the veranda were torn apart; Diamond's room received a third ransacking, this time from the elements; all the doors —top, bottom, front and back— of the livery were blown off, patches of shingles were shredded and the hay in the mow had been swept away. Ol' Ross figured the barn had survived because the doors had been open to let the heat out, this allowed the wind to pass through as well. Dexter argued that the barn survived because it was off the main track of the twister. Otherwise, it would have suffered like the stage depot: it was gone. Leon's Mercantile store lay a flattened ruin, his lumber yard destroyed, merchandise scattered to the wind; now would have been an excellent time to have a supply of building materials in stock. Frost's Funeral Parlour stood the test, May-Anne's eatery did not. And so it went, several entrepreneurs lost home and business, some lost one or the other, a few folks were lucky on both counts, many families were left homeless. Charlie Morris, the telegraph operator, lost his life and a young child was crushed under a fallen wall. Ironically, the rail depot was unscathed and the key-punch should have been at work, but Charlie's body was found pinned under a fallen cottonwood near his home. Depot agent Stafford explained that Charlie had slipped home to close up his house against the elements. Doc Stohl set up shop in the

town office (the clinic had disappeared) and worked thirty-six hours straight setting broken bones, mending gashes and treating wounds, before he collapsed in utter exhaustion. Several horses, two cows and two dogs had to be put down due to injury. Many other animals —pigs, chickens, pets — had died during the storm. The swath of fallen cottonwoods through town and across the creek left a grievous kind of devastation: buildings can be replaced in weeks or months, hundred year old trees take a century.

Dexter's ranch had been spared; it was just beyond the reach of the tornado. The heavy winds prior to the twister tore down branches along the cottonwood lane and shifted anything that wasn't heavy or fastened down in the yard. Edith Dexter didn't see the approaching storm and consequently lost linen from the clothes line.

The darkened afternoon had yielded to true darkness by the time most everyone had been accounted for. The fifth gunman had not presented himself. Street lamps which were intact had been lit. A soggy Bradley McBain accompanied a bedraggled Samantha Dexter to her sewing shop — it withstood the beating— there were several boards ripped away from the false front and the big circular centre pane of the new window had shattered. The proprietress had previously taken a

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moment to check on Matilda; she found the widow unharmed. Matilda had told Samantha that being unable to hear probably preserved her from a death of fright.

The Widow Frye was not in sight when Sam returned with McBain. The shop was silent, still and only partially illuminated by the glow of a surviving street lamp through the broken window. The patter of drizzle on the boardwalk seemed amplified through the opening. Diamond shifted near the sewing machines. Samantha searched for a match and lit a lamp. Preston's survival instinct flashed a warning but he could not discern the cause of his uneasiness. Voiceless mannequins came to life in the flickering shadows; the room held an eerie foreboding.

“Matilda must have gone off to bed already,” Samantha commented. “I wonder why she didn't hang a blanket or something across the hole in the window?”

“Perhaps she didn't hear it break,” McBain suggested.

“She's had the cook stove fired; it is warm in here, except near the window.”

A faint rustle of the curtain leading into Matilda's suite caught Preston's attention. The tall, gunman who had arrived on the afternoon stage stood in the doorway, a malevolent smile spreading across his face.



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At first Samantha did not notice the stranger as she searched through a shelf of remnants. She held up a large square of wagon canvass. “Brad, do you think this may be large enough?”

When McBain did not respond she turned to see what held his attention. A sharp gasp escaped but she recovered instantly. “Who are you and what are you doing in my shop?” she demanded. Fear crept into her voice, “Where is Matilda?”

The smile widened, revealing a set of startlingly white teeth.

He has to have an audience, Preston thought. He'll take his time, savouring the moment, like a cat toying with a mouse... May as well indulge him... “Is the price on my head worth dying for?”

The assassin shrugged indifferently.

Samantha drew back, holding the cloth to her face. McBain's eyes never left the gunman but he could feel her fear. She could not know why, but she knew too well what was about to unfold.

Diamond prodded, “A shame you won't be able to spend the money you and your four colleagues, now deceased, were paid for your trip to Way-cross. Five men for three murders... someone miscalculated the odds. Now it is you alone; *de hombre a hombre* ...and you won't leave this room alive.”

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A flicker (was it doubt?) showed in the flinty eyes, but the shootist remained as still and mute as Samantha's dummies.

In hand combat, Preston had learned from the Chinese Master, the person to make the first move is the one who first sacrifices his readiness. An opponent will reveal intent just a tiny fraction of a second before he shifts to the offensive.

Preston waited now while the words he had spoken distracted the man in the doorway. The hired gun had lost the opportunity to grandstand in front of the pretty lady. He didn't appreciate that.

Almost imperceptibly, a tic, a twitch, tugged at a corner of the mirthless smile. Hands at opposite sides of the room flashed down and came up holding revolvers belching flame.

Shots blended together.

Two simultaneous, dead-centre forehead shots.

Samantha screamed.

The falling gunman triggered a second round from his double-action revolver; purely reflex; the slug buried itself in the floor of the sewing shop.

Heavy boots thudded on the boardwalk and Dexter burst into the room, the old Navy revolver in his right hand.

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Smoke drifted toward the ceiling, burned powder reeked upon the air, Samantha stood beside the counter, sobbing hysterically. A dead man lay stretched out at the entrance of the suite.

Bradley McBain rose to his feet brushing the plaster remains of a headless mannequin from his clothes.

“What in hell...” Dexter barked.

Samantha lowered the cloth she held to her face and looked in wonder at McBain standing in front of her. “I... I thought you were killed,” She gasped. “You, you fell to the floor,..are you hurt?”

Before Preston could answer, a sudden flare-up illuminated the darkened suite where Matilda resided. He stepped around the fallen gunman and leaped through the curtained doorway, landing in the tiny kitchen. Widow Frye was jamming papers into the wood-stove. Preston grabbed her wrist, pulled the documents from the fire, then ripped a cloth from the kitchen table and wrapped it over the burning accounts to suffocate the flame. Matilda screamed in venomous anger as Preston dragged her into the lamp lighted sewing shop.

“Brad!” Samantha cried, “What are you doing with Matilda? Let go of her this instant!”

Dexter came forward holstering his gun. “McBain, you let that woman alone right now.”

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Preston did not release the struggling old lady but turned to face the sheriff, “*McBain?* Moody, you got my name right!”

## *Chapter 24*

Preston shoved Matilda into the chair by her sewing machine and took up a position behind. He waved Samantha away when she started to kneel in front of her employee. “She doesn't need to read your lips Samantha, *Mrs. Frye*, can hear as well as you or I.”

“Wh... what do you mean she can hear as well as us?” Samantha quavered.

Matilda sat rigid, her countenance a stony mask.

“It is a rather long and complicated story,” Preston said. “I have been piecing this puzzle together for many months. As your father has been loosely informed, Samantha, I am in Way-cross on a federal investigation regarding the banking industry. Matilda is one of the masterminds behind an organization that has been assuming possession of small town banks throughout the territory.

*C. C. Phillips*

Moody, I briefed you earlier today, so I won't belabour that issue. Anyway, I'm certain to know more when I've perused these scorched documents....”

A swirl of wind brought a shower of rain through the broken window. The lamp dimmed, its flame threatening to die. Samantha retrieved the material she had planned to use for a temporary covering, extracted several long pins from her sewing basket and hurried over to the opening. Dexter, seeing her intentions, moved to help. Over his shoulder he grunted, “Keep talkin' McBain.”

The captive shifted in her seat and Preston warned, “Don't make me have to tie you up.

“You see, Matilda Frye is truthfully Mrs. Ethyl Rittinger, twenty year wife of Governor Sheffield Rittinger....”

Samantha dropped her end of the canvass as Dexter turned so fast he pulled it from her hands. “She's what?” he croaked.

McBain nodded. “Yes, she and the governor are married. Matilda has used other aliases in the past, the most infamous, Louise Lafayette; you have her picture on an old warrant in your office, Moody, and frankly, though it barely resembles her, it was that dodger that gave me cause for consideration.”

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Samantha grasped the material and, taking a large stick-pin from her mouth, asked, "Who is Louise Lafayette?"

"Miss Lafayette is one of the people who profited immensely from the Credit Mobilier Scandal ten years ago. Both she and the not yet governor, Rittinger were up to their necks in embezzling Federal subsidies for railroad construction. But no one knew they were husband and wife; that information and the realization that he was involved in the scandal have come as a result of my investigation. When the situation grew too hot, Miss Lafayette, most conveniently, died...."

A second gust of wind tugged the curtain from Dexter's hands. He grumbled, "Sam, let's pin this damn thing up here before the twister hits again."

Preston continued, "Though not directly involved with that part of the case, I had access to pertinent information and followed the federal investigation quite closely." He touched Mrs. Frye's shoulder. "What was it, Matilda, you were pushed off a train? Yes, I think that is what happened. How ironic you should die while riding with the railway company you stole a fortune from!"

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“Louise Lafayette was, ostensibly, killed and she took the fall, not just from the moving train, but also for the missing money. Her share was never recovered. Rittinger, smooth politician that he is, came under no suspicion.”

The pair at the broken window managed to fasten the canvas securely. It bulged inward but kept out the moisture as the intermittent drops splattered dully on the sheet. Dexter reached for his makings and fashioned a cigarette. Addressing the subject of McBain's dialogue he asked, “So, Matilda, what did you do with all that money?”

The widow Frye allowed no indication that she had heard and Preston answered for her.

“It is a safe assumption that capital for the initial buy out of the local banks came from proceeds of the Credit Mobilier Scandal.”

Mrs. Frye squirmed in her seat; hot, seething anger flashing in her eyes.

Samantha looked away. Sadness steeped in her voice as she begged, “Tell me this isn't true, Matilda. Please tell me you aren't this Louise Lafayette, or, or Governor Rittinger's wife.”

“He can't prove anything,” Matilda snarled. “He is just...”

Samantha whirled to face the prisoner. “He is just *what*, Matilda? He has just *proven* that you are not deaf, you could not read my lips when my



head was turned... that makes Mr. McBain's accusations easier to believe..." Samantha's voice broke, "...knowing that you have deceived me for so long..."

Dexter moved to his stepdaughter's side and placed a comforting arm around her.

The gunpowder and smoke had gone out the window; now, with the canvass sealing up the room, the smell of blood and death emanating from the grotesque body lying exposed in the door way began to permeate the air.

Footsteps sounded on the walk, paused, then a hesitant knock preceded the opening of the door and a haggard George Kirwin poked his head in. "Saw the shop lamp. Everything all right in here?"

Diamond, who had placed one hand on Matilda and the other on his Colt, relaxed.

Dexter answered, "We've had another shootout, George. There's a dead man stretched out here on the floor."

Kirwin stepped in, closed the door and came close enough to see the dead stranger. "Not one of ours," he sighed his relief. Then, searching the faces of the living, he said, "What's going on now?"

"McBain, here, is telling us a story. I'll fill you in later, George. I'm not so sure I understand things as they sit right now."

*C. C. Phillips*

The mayor frowned at his exclusion, but Preston extinguished protest, “Mr. Kirwin, this body should be moved to the morgue. Could you round up a couple lads to take it there?”

Kirwin's mouth worked several times. He was not used to being told what to do, but the authority in McBain's voice precluded argument. He grumbled, “Russell Frost's funeral parlour is already quite full... I'll see if he can fit in another corpse.”

“I'll wait here for you, Mr. Kirwin,” Samantha offered.

The mayor left abruptly and McBain returned his attention to the captive. “Ethyl Rittinger became the driving force behind Sheffield Rittinger's rise to the governorship. With a change in identity, a change in appearance —trust me, it is easy to do— she moved west and assumed the role of the loving wife of a budding politician. But something went awry... maybe someone saw through the disguise or recognized Louise Lafayette. Perhaps an accomplice from the past returned to haunt them. Mrs. Rittinger suddenly became ill and died —for the second time— in a small town hospital. The glib Sheffield Rittinger played on the sympathy of key personalities, using this devastating setback as the final leg up to the governorship.”

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Dexter drew a chair from the second sewing machine and planted his weary frame on the seat. He removed his hat and brushed a sleeve across his forehead. Relighting the stub of his dead cigarette he growled, "How do you know all this? Where did you find this information?"

Preston noted the sheriff used the term "information" instead of his earlier "hogwash".

"Mostly, I worked with a handful of my own suspicions and a confusion of suspicious acts by others. For instance: When I first received orders to commence this investigation, I found it curious that the complaint made to the President contained no reference to territorial representatives. Subsequently, I learned that Governor Rittinger has been oblivious to the recent change in ownership of thirty financial institutions. That in itself could be an outrageous coincidence, however, he must certainly have been made aware of the squeeze these new managements have placed on the citizens in his bailiwick. Obviously, these protestations never went further than Rittinger's desk. A group of citizens finally circumvented the Governor's office to bring the matter to a higher level of investigation. This latter revelation, along with several other responses to my queries, arrived via telegraph late yesterday. The telegrams supplied sufficient background for me to draw firm conclusions."

Deliberately shifting back, Preston continued, "I do not know the whereabouts of the late Louise Lafayette or Mrs. Ethyl Rittinger during the interim while she and Sheffield concocted a scheme to inherit half of the territory. Probably about the same time Ethyl Rittinger died, Matilda aged twenty years and became Mrs. Frye. The Widow Frye was an ingenious cover for the dead aliases; Samantha provided the perfect situation when she issued the advertisement for a seamstress. What better place to hide than Way-cross?"

"Hiding in my sewing shop!" Samantha cried. "Matilda, how could you do this to me? We were... I thought we were friends." She turned to McBain, an appeal in her tear-filled eyes, "Brad, Matilda can't be who you say she is. She couldn't have fooled me this long."

Dexter sighed, "Sam, she fooled you into thinkin' she was deaf; that's a fact."

"Mrs. Rittinger, Widow Frye, has fooled many people in her lifetime," Preston said. "The day I rode into town, as you recall, Moody, someone took a shot at us from atop this sewing shop. I knew it was me, not you, they were trying to kill. When the shooting started, I noticed the head of the sniper was bare—not remarkable, for a man would have removed his hat in order to keep a lower profile—but a man would not have his hair tied up in a bun. It was a very quick glimpse—I

wasn't positive— regardless, I deliberately aimed off-target when emptying my gun, feeling that the assassin may be more valuable to me alive than dead. Subsequently, I climbed up on the roof to fix the bullet holes, and,” Preston searched a pocket, then extracted a small piece of gray cotton material. “This remnant was hooked on the head of a nail. This is a coincidence, I must admit, but Mrs. Frye is now wearing the dress which this piece came from. One night I watched through the kitchen window as she mended the tear. If you were to inspect the lower hem, you would find evidence of repair work.”

“You filthy, peeping son of a bitch!”

Matilda swore.

Preston ignored the outburst. “That same night, I also began to suspect that Widow Frye wasn't deaf: I felt certain she heard the whistle on the kettle when her tea water boiled.”

Sheriff Dexter's lips were moving but no words came out. Samantha stared vacantly at Matilda.

McBain went on, “Frank Collier, the desk clerk at the Grand Hotel, informed me that Rittinger often stayed in Way-cross. I didn't think much of this information, for the town is the end of the line for Union Pacific and there is a substantial area of the Governor's territory beyond the rails. However, I did check on him from time-to-time

*C. C. Phillips*

during his last visit. On one occasion, the night of the storm, he had female company in his room. Though the voices were indistinguishable, I determined that they were more than casual acquaintances. I waited outside the Grand's rear entrance and saw a lady leave the hotel later that evening. The lamp blew out and I could not be absolutely positive....”

With a lie Diamond baited the trap: “Frank Collier admitted it was Widow Frye.”

And Matilda stepped in with both feet: “Sheffield is my husband!” she shrieked. “Of course we spent time together! We don't have a normal marriage anymore....” She bent forward, covering her eyes with her hands as sobs shuddered through her body.

Samantha stepped closer to console the lady whom she had come to regard as a dear friend.

In a flicker, the vulpine Widow Frye snatched the sewing basket from her machine and drew out a small .38 revolver. Fully cocked, she pointed the deadly weapon at her former employer. Matilda snarled, “Nobody touch me or the gun goes off. Back away, McBain. Dexter, keep your hands clear or I swear I'll shoot your daughter dead.”

Horror struck, Samantha stared at the muzzle. Dexter stepped away, his hands raised high. McBain calmly reached over the lady's shoulder and prized the gun from her fingers.

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Unfortunately, not before she managed to squeeze the trigger.

*Click.*

Samantha's knees sagged and Dexter stepped forward to catch her. "Damn it, McBain, the old bitch would have shot Sam. How the hell did you know the gun wasn't loaded?"

Preston delved in another pocket and palmed six brass cartridges. "Remember the day I put Muley Trippett through Samantha's window? I used a measuring tape from Mrs. Frye's sewing machine; the tape lay partially covered by the sewing basket and when I raised the basket the weight seemed quite out of proportion. Tonight when Samantha and I came in the shop, I noticed the sewing basket again and my curiosity was renewed. So, while Samantha was lighting the lamp I looked inside and found the revolver. As a precaution, I unloaded it."

Shock masked Samantha's face. "Matilda, you tried to shoot me... You would have killed me..."

McBain attempted to soothe the distraught girl. "Her heart pumps pure venom, Samantha, there is not a drop of true blood in her veins. You would not be her first victim..."

Dexter glowered at Matilda, "Who else did you try to kill?"

*C. C. Phillips*

Preston answered for the mute lady who had conveniently become deaf again. "Mrs. Frye hired Muley Trippett to spring Kenny Lester from your jail, Moody. She is the one who paid them the five Double Eagles to murder me. She is the killer who shot Muley Trippett dead in his cell; murdered him in cold blood so he wouldn't talk."

Samantha shuddered, a mask of horror on her face. "Oh, Matilda... How could you..."

"The truth may never come to light, but I believe that my encounter with the Lester brothers before reaching Way-cross was simply misfortune. They desperately needed horses and I had one. It is entirely possible, but I do not think Mrs. Rittinger had a hand in that misguided hold-up.

"The Chief was hired, by Governor Rittinger, I suspect, to draw me into a fight in which I would surely be killed. I know the two of them were mutual acquaintances."

Dexter, now entirely convinced of McBain's credibility, grunted, "Well, that didn't pan out for 'em either."

"So they brought in this fellow," Preston nodded toward the dead gunman, "and four others to tidy up the loose ends. I think the Rittingers had hoped to stop before Way-cross—it was too near for Matilda's comfort— but they knew I had to be eliminated. Perhaps they had a scheme to incorporate my demise with the attempted



assassinations at the bank. Possibly pressure from other members in their organization drove them to tip over one more money house. No doubt, they feared losing control, a small slide had turned into an avalanche.

Preston changed the topic. "I wonder what's happened to Kirwin? He ought to have returned or sent someone by now."

Dexter shrugged. "Probably making room at Frost's; like George said, the place will be fillin' up."

Samantha sighed. "Charlie Morris and the little Deitric boy in with all those dead thieves and murderers, it doesn't seem right."

Dexter stiffened, "What about that feller you shot out the hotel window? What about that bastard making off with Sam?"

"That is one of several pieces I had a very difficult time putting into place. Ballard—that is the word written on his plaster cast and also the name he used when I knew him in Clarkston—must have been part of a another plan to be rid of me. He left the note in my room; the writing matched the scrawl on the cast. I suspect the idea was to lure me out of town to find Samantha, and then Dunvegan and Peel—that is the names of two more men who died this afternoon— would be waiting in ambush along the trail."

*C. C. Phillips*

“But how come I cannot remember being taken away with that dirty man, the one you call Ballard, the one with the broken arm?” Samantha interjected. “How come I can't remember... some other things?”

The shop door was pushed open to admit George Kirwin and two young men from Waycross. Preston recognized one as an employee at the former mercantile. The mayor said to them, “Take that body down to Russell Frost.” Then he addressed the others, “Sorry I took so long, Russell needed help making more space.”

While the helpers lugged the gunman past them Preston kept a firm hand on Matilda's arm.

Mayor Kirwin closed the door behind the men then turned back to the quartet in the sewing shop. Folding his arms with an air of finality, he said, “Now, Sheriff, I would like to know just what the *hell* is going on in my town.”

“A hell of a lot, George. A *hell* of a lot. McBain here, is in the middle of rolling out a tale I can't hardly believe, but it all fits, near as I can tell. Right now he's talkin' 'bout that feller who kidnapped Sam; the one he shot out the window of the Grand.”

Kirwin nodded at McBain, “I'm listening.”

Preston gazed into Samantha's troubled blue eyes for a moment before continuing. “Your

trusted employee is the reason that you cannot remember anything of your abduction. She is also responsible for the other gaps or lapses in your memory.”

“But she never did anything,” Samantha protested. “I wasn't drugged. Why did I suddenly wake up on the back of a strange horse out on the wagon road by the forks? I wasn't tired or even drowsy. And, why did I have your gun in my hand that day,” Samantha reddened, “That day we went for walk in Dad's pasture?”

“There may have been other instances you do not even suspect,” McBain said. “For example, you were in my room one afternoon when I was out... my travel trunk had been tampered with but you could not slip the lock.”

Dexter flashed a glance at Kirwin; the sheriff would not tolerate malicious rumours of his daughter being in a stranger's hotel room. “Now, how do you know that, since you weren't there?”

“The expensive perfume Samantha sometimes wears, the fragrance given her by Mrs. Frye; it is quite unique and quite alluring. The scent of it lingered in my hotel room when I returned one evening.”

Dexter scoffed, “Now that may be stretchin' *too far*. Any gal could'a wore that same kind o' perfume. Maybe it was the Dixon girl, the chambermaid.”

*C. C. Phillips*

Samantha touched her fathers arm. "No, Dad, there isn't likely another bottle of that within a hundred miles of Way-cross."

"Then how the hell did it get in McBain's room?" Dexter expostulated.

The widow had clammed up entirely. She no longer struggled, seldom even blinked. She sat relaxed, completely composed. Kirwin remained silent but his eyes followed the banter like a cat watching a chickadee.

"Matilda Frye is a hypnotist."

Sheriff Dexter and Samantha drew back as if McBain had announced Matilda was a rattlesnake.

Widow Frye stiffened and her lips curled in a snarl.

Preston Diamond had just trumped her last ace.

## *Chapter 25*

Samantha was mortified. “A hypnotist? But how could she hypnotize me? I don't remember her doing anything like that.”

Diamond said, “You weren't supposed to remember anything. You see, Samantha, the ruse of being deaf was the key to Mrs. Frye's mesmeric talent. When you sat or knelt in front of Matilda to allow her to read your lips, she was able to hypnotize you. After the first time, she had control of your mind. Subsequent opportunities were as easy as snapping her fingers. You were in her power and she used you to execute her guileful schemes.”

Samantha felt invaded, violated. “How could she be so cruel?”

“There are no bounds, no rules in the game she plays. Matilda, Ethyl, Louise, who ever she

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presumes to be, is ruthless beyond imagination.” He glanced at the captive member of his audience, “There are probably occasions when she even surprises herself!”

Mayor Kirwin shook his head. “I must be in the middle of something that will take the rest of the night to sort out and I have plenty to do before I find my bed tonight as it is. Moody, you can report to me in the morning. Or rather, I’ll come to you; my stage office and the town building are both gone.”

As the Mayor went out, McBain turned to Dexter, “It is fortunate that you are still in town this late, Sheriff....”

“Well, I was on my way to fetch Samantha so we could go home when them shots rattled my eardrums.” Dexter glanced at his step-daughter. “Mother will be gitten’ worried by now.”

Nodding toward Widow Frye, McBain said, “We have a problem here, but I’d rather discuss it out of her hearing, even though she may be deaf at the moment. We best lock Matilda in your jail for the night; is your office still standing?”

The sheriff’s office had taken a beating in the tornado, however, for the most part, it remained upright. The decrepit awning left town with the wind, most of the shingles and all of the front windows were in need of replacement. Water seeped from a dozen leaks in the roof. Dust, leaves

and hay (the latter likely transported from Ol' Ross's loft) littered the front reception area. The cell room where Matilda decided to spend the night had a few drips; puddles were forming on the floor, but the bed was dry and the iron bars sturdy. The murderess, her hands tied securely, was led into the room by both Dexter and McBain. Matilda did not resist as she was ushered into the cell and her bonds removed. The sheriff left the lamp burning in the jail room and Preston deliberately kept the partition door ajar so he could watch the gate of the occupied cell.

Samantha, McBain and Dexter gathered in the recently renovated open-air front office. Shards of glass crunched under their feet. The rain had eased to a slow drizzle but sheet lightning so bright as to obscure the lantern, flickered continuously out in the street.

“We have a very dangerous criminal in your jail tonight, Moody. I don't think the cell is secure for felons of Matilda's calibre. She may have liaisons on the outside too, and for that reason, I suggest we have two guards watching her at all times. Hopefully, very soon, we shall be able to pass her over to higher authority.”

Dexter expostulated, “Two guards? I can't be here all night... Sam has to be gittin' home too. Her mother will be fit for tyin'.”

*C. C. Phillips*

“I’ll take the buckboard home and tell Mother everything is all right. Then I can come back for you, Dad... Maybe Ole can help with the night watch....”

McBain interrupted, “I really do not think you should be travelling alone tonight, Samantha. We don’t know what trouble is on the way; there may be someone out there waiting for an opportunity to even the score; maybe take you hostage as a bargaining chip for Matilda’s release.”

“Sheriff, as Samantha said, maybe Ole can help out. Perhaps you could go down to the livery and see who is there. I’d appreciate having both Ole and Lonny Fischer brought to your office if you can find them.”

Dexter immediately found Luke and Lonny Fischer among the homeless at Ol’ Ross’s barn-cum-hostel. Lonny still clung to the bedraggled pup. Luke’s hips wouldn’t allow him to go up and down the stair to the loft so he and his son had rolled out blankets in an empty stall. Ole Evenson’s rheumatism argued against climbing steps too but he had managed to reach the loft and crawl into a temporary bed. Someone awoke the old Norwegian and Ole shuffled back down the stair to meet Dexter.

When the trio arrived back at the office, Lonny’s eyes were huge in the lantern light.



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Standing poker stiff, like a new cavalry recruit, he managed to keep his voice from cracking. "Good evening, Mr. McBain." The pup under his arm prevented him from saluting.

Preston smiled warmly, "Good evening, Lonny, thanks for coming at this late hour." Turning to the Norwegian, he added, "God kveld, Ole."

"Ja, god kveld, McBain."

"In addition to the ruination of the town, we have another emergency on our hands tonight. Sheriff Dexter and I will need your assistance." McBain turned to the youth, "Lonny, there aren't many people whom I can trust, so I am counting on you."

Lonny gulped audibly and nodded.

"Was Mr. Stafford from the rail depot at Ol' Ross's barn or do you know if his house is still standing?"

"I didn't see Mr. Stafford in the livery. I think the twister missed his house... you want I should go fetch 'im?"

"No... we have another job for you, not a pleasant task in this drizzle either. Could you bring Sheriff Dexter's rig around to the office and escort Miss Dexter home? When you get to the ranch, unharness the team, saddle Dexter's horse, then ride back here."

*C. C. Phillips*

“Sure, Mr. McBain, I can do that; I’ll do it right away.”

“I’ll help you with the horses when we get to the ranch, Lonny.”

“Er..er, thanks, Miss Samantha.” Lonny’s face reddened. He clumsily handed Samantha the puppy then dashed out into the street.

Ole murmured softly as he took the mongrel from Miss Dexter, “Ja, I find a bed for you tonight little dog.”

From his waistband, McBain tugged the .38 Matilda had attempted to use. He reloaded the cylinder and handed the gun to Samantha. “Take this with you, and don’t take any chances.”

“You think there are more of Matilda’s cohorts hangin’ around town?” Dexter growled. “My God, we killed five of ’em today already.”

“I do not know how many people are involved in the Rittings’ scheme, certainly many more than we have accounted for. I don’t know if there are any alive in Way-cross tonight.”

Samantha’s voice quavered, “I’ll take the gun.”

McBain said, “I’m going to find Abel Stafford, I need to send a telegram.”

Dexter grunted, “Charlie Morris was killed by a falling tree, he is the only telegraph man we had.”

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

“If the lines weren't blown down between here and the mainline, I can operate the transmitter.”

Preston squeezed Samantha's hand and said, “I'll see you tomorrow morning. Moody, don't let Matilda put you under her spell, both you and Ole keep an eye on her *constantly*. I'll be back as soon as I can convince Stafford to let me in the depot and send that message.”

“If ya haven't already thought of it, better send a note 'bout our perdic'ment, here, too.” Sheriff Dexter advised. “Mayor Kirwin says we need some outside assistance.”

Preston followed Dexter's directions to the cottage where Abel Stafford lived. A few loud raps on the front door roused the rail man from his sleep and Preston soon convinced the agent to allow him entrance to the depot and telegraph office. Upon entering the telegraph station, Preston noted that the now deceased Charlie Morris had kept his desk and the room tidy. There were no messages in the trays so the operator must have had his work caught up before rushing home.

A prompt response to Preston's signal indicated the telegraph lines were in operation. Diamond quickly tapped out the first telegram concerning Way-cross's plight due to the tornado. The second, a lengthy coded message, took more

*C. C. Phillips*

time. It would be translated and read in the office of the President of the United States tomorrow. Preston felt certain Governor Ritterger would be in custody within twenty-four hours.

Matilda Frye lay awake upon the sorry bunk in her cell when Preston returned to the sheriff's office. She had presented no problems to her keepers. Lonny Fischer arrived on Dexter's horse a short time later and the sheriff immediately excused himself from duty. The pup grunted contentedly in its sleep. It lay curled up in a fluffy ball on a blanket that Ole had found in the office.

"I trust Miss Dexter reached home safely?" Preston said to the tow-headed youth.

"Yessir, Mr. McBain, I took her home in the buckboard. There weren't nobody around, nowhere."

"Well, you have done a good job for us tonight. It is very important that Miss Dexter is taken care of."

Preston continued in a lower voice, "I haven't had a chance to tell you, Lonny, Sheriff Dexter and I have come to an agreement. I will buy his place and, if you and your father are still interested, you can run the ranch for me."

Lonny's eyes were huge when he first arrived at the sheriff's office, they now grew as big as Dexter's coffee mug. "For really, Mr. McBain?"

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

“For sure, Lonny; by the way, did your house blow away this afternoon?”

Lonny nodded. “Lots of folks lost their houses though, so we aren't any worse off than them. Dad, he hid down in the cellar hole and that was lucky for him. Me, I crawled under the walk lookin' fer my new dog and we just stayed there 'til she all blew over.”

“I am planning to build a new house for you and your dad out at the ranch —the Dexter's aren't ready to move yet— in the meantime I thought we could fix something up in Sheriff Dexter's blacksmith shop. It wouldn't be elegant, but it would be a roof over your heads.”

Preston glanced at the old Norwegian. “Maybe Ole could move in with you too.”

Ole grinned and Lonny squirmed with excitement. “You bet, Mr. McBain!”

“It is pretty late now, you go find your Dad, and tell him the news when he wakes up. And, Lonny, as I told you before, *no one else need know.*”

“You bet, Mr. McBain!” Lonny repeated. He scooped up the sleeping dog, then dashed out into the night.

Morning came to Way-cross. The sun, apologising for its performance of the previous day, shone beautifully; the temperature moderated.

*C. C. Phillips*

Night had not been uneventful for Preston Diamond. He had retrieved Matilda's bundle of papers from the sewing shop and, making himself comfortable on the bed in the adjacent cell to Widow Frye, began to peruse the documents. The Rittinger's must have felt secure in the cover Matilda had, for the incriminating evidence contained in the folder was over-whelming. Details: names, dates, places, meetings were meticulously documented, like a well-run, legitimate business.

An inadvertent link to the past appeared in a letter written in beautiful script:

Dear Ethyl:

It is with great sadness that I compose this note, for it concerns someone I care for very deeply. Today, a gentleman with whom I have been acquainted for the past several weeks has left Clarkston. I believe he could be bound for Way-cross. Mr. Ballard saw him leave town on horseback (a tall bay gelding) and he said the man was wearing dark clothes, a flat-crowned western hat; more or less dressed as a cowboy. (His eyes, if you have the good fortune to meet him close-up, are of the

most divine blue.) His name while employed here was Frazier Wentworth, but I am quite certain that is not the name he will use upon reaching your town. This morning, just before noon, Frazier Wentworth, working as clerk at the bank, shot and killed the two men you and Sheffield hired to assassinate Herman Goldman. Fortunately, they were able to kill Goldman before Wentworth shot them both, leaving no one to tell the tale.

Frazier Wentworth, or who ever he may be, is a very special man. Please do not hurt him when you have him killed.

Your Loving Sister,  
Sarah

P.S. Frazier Wentworth broke Mr. Ballard's forearm last week. No one saw him do it, but I was not surprised when Ballard informed me. I wish I could have spent more time with him.

S.D.

As he finished reading the letter, Preston heard a rustling from within the adjacent cell. The

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lamp had burned low and its light began to flicker. He glanced across and saw an apparition, or perhaps he was experiencing *deja vu*. Matilda had removed her little-old-lady spectacles, along with every other article of clothing she had. She stood nude in her cell, an alluring smile on her lips. Her body was not that of a sixty year old grandmother, it was a near exact copy of Sarah Dickens; maybe just a little heavier. Any other discrepancies were hidden in the soft glow from the single lamp.

She looked meaningfully at the letter in McBain's hand, then said in a seductive purr, "Did you enjoy my sister's company, Mr. Wentworth? I can assure that, if you'd like to spend some time with me, it will be even more pleasurable."

Preston was gallant, "I appreciate the offer, Mrs. Frye, you are a very lovely lady, but I think you should put your clothes back on. I don't wish to be on the wrong side of the Governor and you are making Ole uncomfortable."

Later, as dawn probed the room, Diamond watched from under the brim of his hat as Matilda, using a hair pin, picked the lock on the cell door. Preston knew it was not a particularly tough mechanism to unlatch—he'd done it himself—but he was still surprised at the ease with which the prisoner opened the iron barred door.

Mrs. Frye was not as reasonable about returning to her cell as she had been when Preston



*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

asked her to put her clothes on. As he neared, she flew at him, biting, scratching and kicking. Preston applied a painless technique that put the lady to sleep temporarily. He and Ole bound her hands, removed the remainder of her hair pins, then relocked the cell.

And, when morning did fully arrive, more problems came with it.

Dexter returned and Preston went to the hotel to have breakfast. The lounge was quite busy, as May Anne's restaurant had been razed in the storm. Barbara Kirwin had a change of venue but not a change of demeanour. On his way back to the sheriff's office, Frank Collier in tow (he hoped to interrogate the hotel clerk) Diamond espied Colon Patch, the news reporter. Patch was in a familiar position behind the tripod, hiding under the curtain. As Preston shifted to avoid the lens, the camera box emitted a small cloud of smoke, there was a very loud blast and Frank Collier took a slug through his shoulder. Frank fell screaming in the mud of the street as Preston's Colt destroyed camera box and reporter.

Lucky miss for Diamond, not so lucky for Collier.

“My camera!” someone wailed.

Diamond turned to face the voice. The man with the thin moustache and long nose who had arrived on yesterday's train hurried over.

*C. C. Phillips*

“Someone stole my photography equipment while I was on my way here to capture the story of The Chief. That’s my camera. That... that dead man took it from me and I lost a day trying to find new equipment. But there are no cameras to be bought out here on the frontier. I decided to come for the story and forego the pictures,” he lifted the curtain, “now my camera is ruined.”

Diamond managed a few hours of sleep before Dexter, acting on Mayor Kirwin’s orders, roused him to operate the telegraph at the rail depot. There were many messages to send and more than a few to receive. One coded telegram arrived for Preston himself; it translated:

*Agents en route stop governor in custody  
stop escort Mme. Ritinger with evidence to  
Merryvale stop*

Merryvale was the two-horse town on the mainline at the head of the Way-cross spur.

The creek ran clear out at McBain’s ranch, high water and debris from the storm had swept by. Grass tended more toward yellow than green as the

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

heat of mid-summer took its toll. Samantha Dexter and Bradley McBain strolled hand in hand in the pasture where contented Herefords grazed. Busy sounds of carpentry echoed from the ranch yard where a new house was being erected. With the help of the U.S. Army and carloads of necessities, Way-cross had risen from devastation. The town faced a tough, up-hill climb, but the long run promised a brighter future.

It was a time to think of the future; it was a time to be in love.

More than anything, Preston Diamond longed for the peace and stability of this bucolic existence. He wanted to live his life with the lovely goddess now at his side. And he feared that that may never be. "I have been called back to Washington; prosecution is depending upon my testimony and substantiation of Matilda's papers for the trials."

They stopped walking, Preston turned to Samantha. "The investigation and the trial will be very high profile: Governor Rittinger and Louise Lafayette are names that will have the newsmen and photographers buzzing like horseflies on a hot day; particularly so, since Louise has been supposed dead for ten years. Throughout the proceedings, I must maintain a very low profile

*C. C. Phillips*

keeping my identity dissembled for there will be people from outside the of the court room who want me dead. And, the public must not know me when it is over.

“Disguise is second, maybe first nature, to me, for when I am not incognito, I have no real identity to call my own,” Preston paused.

“Samantha, I have not walked many miles in my own shoes... When I am with you there is no pretense, no charade. I *would* like to grow accustomed to being me... being me, with you.”

She put her arms around his neck and gazed deep into his eyes. “If I were Matilda, I could mesmerise you, put you under my spell... maybe then I could hold you here forever.”

The pair had reached the high bank overlooking the creek and the meadow beyond; the place where they first made love.

“I have not been candid. You don't know *me*, you do not even know my name. The Dexter Ranch, the home you will always have, is the first property —property more substantial than a good horse and saddle— that I have ever invested in. But I dare not settle down here; inevitably, I will bring grief to people who have become my friends,” he looked at her meaningfully, “people I care for....”

“This Rittinger business has left a trail of blood throughout the territory. Way-cross will not

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

soon forget the gunman who instigated more killings, in just a few days, than the entire territory has witnessed in years. You wouldn't want to live your life tied to a reputation like that.”

Samantha did not appreciate the direction the conversation was leading. “You cannot blame yourself for any of those slayings. Those men were hired to kill; they came to town hunting—not only you— but David O'Malley and his father, too. If you had not been here, where would our town be? We would have corrupt management at the bank; maybe Dad would have been killed and we would be facing a worse devastation than a tornado could ever bring. Way-cross will regard you as a hero.”

“The residual though, Samantha... the aftermath of the trial... strangers, journalists, photographers—like Colon Patch, or, more accurately, the man he impersonated— will be arriving in Way-cross, hoping for a thread, a link to the mysterious witness for the prosecution... and there may be people paid to finish what the others failed to do. If I am not here, they will not linger; if I am here, I become a liability to everyone. Your parents, you, me; we could not lead a normal life...” Preston added miserably, “perhaps I do not understand what 'normal' is...”

“But this is your ranch now!” Samantha protested. “You bought it, it is where you belong.”

*C. C. Phillips*

Preston considered her words. “In time this *will* blow over; bigger news will push the Rittinger file into the recesses of history... in the big city that can take as little as a week or two... in Way-cross it may take a decade or longer.”

Diamond recalled the haunting nightmare of his youth: the brutal murder of his parents; he thought of the picture in the cover of his gold pocket watch. He *knew* how horribly devastating it is to lose someone you love. Tears filled his blue eyes, “Samantha, I could not live with myself if something happened to you; something I was to blame for. When I saw Ballard shooting and chasing after you, my whole world stopped. I could never pick myself up again if you were lost....”

Samantha clung to him desperately. “Brad, when those men attacked Lenore and I in Boston, I did not believe it possible to ever stand tall again. I did... and from you I have learned that I can love with all my heart. You have made me whole. Please do not send me back to the horrible nightmares, the loneliness....”

He glanced over her head and saw Lonny Fischer, on foot, running toward them; the gangly pup clumsily trying to keep up. Preston stiffened. “Something is wrong!”

*Preston Diamond in Way-cross*

Lonny panted up, his eyes huge. Gasping for breath he blurted, “Mr. McBain...there's riders in the yard...they got guns...they're lookin' for you!”

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<http://ccphillips.net/>







C. C. Phillips grew up on a mixed farm along the edge of the Great Sandhills region of the Canadian prairies. 'The Hills' provided a wonderland of adventure and enchantment for a growing lad, his dog and saddle horse; the semi-annual two day cattle drive through the heart of the uninhabited landscape were highlights of the year.

As a youngster, Phillips attended a country school for the first six seasons of his formal education, making the three mile trek on horseback, buggy or cutter. It was here that he realized a love of stories and writing under the tutelage of Mrs. Harrison, a young teacher hailing from Britain.

With the family farming operation lacking in capacity, a young C. C. Phillips entered the work force, delving into a variety of occupations. He worked for a manufacturer of lenses for eye glasses, a tire retread plant and in the communications industry. Writing was relegated to a hobby as he turned his attention to providing for wife, son and daughter.

Phillips's adventurous spirit moved him and his family to La Ronge in central Saskatchewan, and from there to Uranium City in the province's extreme northwest corner. The latter, once a thriving mining community of five thousand, had dwindled to a near-ghost town of two hundred. Here, the wildlife, scenery and solitude captured his heart and rekindled the writer's imagination within.

Throughout the course of his life, C. C. Phillips has continued to write. Now retired, he is able to devote more time to pencil, pen and keyboard. The restoration of a pioneer's homestead shack, destined to be a writing retreat, occupies Phillips's moments of leisure. He and his wife currently reside in their country home in southern Saskatchewan.

